

THE Christian C E N T U R Y

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully

Is there a Benedict Option for liberals?



The Christian century

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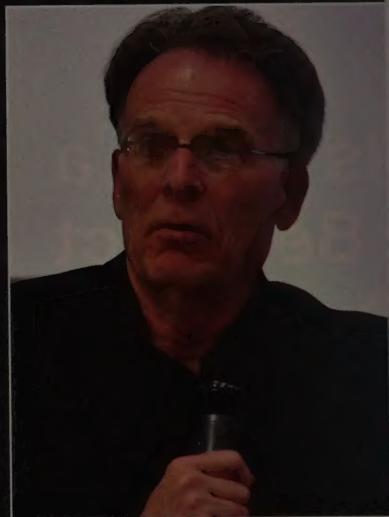
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Have you heard **TONY ROBINSON** talking with Matt Fitzgerald about the humbling challenge of preaching?

MATT FITZGERALD: How did your preaching change over 30 years of regular preaching?

TONY ROBINSON: When I started preaching I thought I had something important to say. Then I realized, "You don't have *anything* to say and people are coming to hear you every week!" I got anxious. My preaching professor told me, "You have to *listen* to the text . . . *live* with the text. You have to *chew* it and *break it open*." That changed me. Church members were giving me time to listen to scripture on their behalf, and they wanted to hear what it said. They were asking, "Is there a word from the Lord?"



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**PREACHERS
ON PREACHING**

a podcast produced for christiancentury.org



From the publisher

Peter W. Marty

Ask the pastor

For the final night of our church's seventh and eighth grade confirmation class, members of the pastoral staff divide up the kids and send them off to different parts of the building for the popular "Ask the Pastor" session. Perched on stools, those of us fielding questions are supposed to take anything thrown at us. I did my best.

Will we get to be with our family in heaven? Let's imagine so. But maybe we need to think of heaven less as an opportunity to love the people we already know and more as a chance to love everyone we meet. Heaven had better be something greater than having our wants satisfied. Right? It's about God, not about us. God is at the center of life eternal.

Do you believe God thinks pineapple should be a pizza topping? Absolutely. If a judge sitting on an island in the Pacific can issue an order stopping the president of the United States, and if the McDonald's on that same island can serve spam, why wouldn't Hawaii's most valuable cash crop belong on pizza? (Don't forget that Jesus would have skipped the spam. He was a Jew.)

Why is everything in the Bible so complicated? Can't it just be straightforward? Well, you have to remember that the Bible was written by all kinds of people. Some of them never had the benefit of going through confirmation before they put down their ideas.

Why are there only 12 disciples? I don't really know, but I'm thinking it must be because somebody hadn't yet invented the 15-passenger van.

Who do you think goes to heaven and who goes to hell? First, I wouldn't worry about who goes where. Instead, just love God in incredibly generous ways. Second, according to Jesus, people who walk over the destitute and delight in judging, insulting, and excluding others seem bent on keeping themselves at the center of everything—which is hell. Heaven appears to be unending joy for all who delight in attending to those who know too few blessings in life.

Does God play sports? Whoa. That's a big one. Lots to do in overseeing the universe. If God plays a sport, let's assume it's tennis, because God likes to let love serve.

Does being a pastor interfere with your family life, especially on holidays? Well, being a pastor means pretty much giving up weekends for life. Between weddings and preaching and a whole lot of church stuff, I'm very busy. But the way we love and take care of each other in a family isn't confined to the weekends. I wish my kids were here to answer your question.

Did you like going to church when you were younger? Actually I did, most of the time, though not every experience with church or God knocked my socks off. But many of the really valuable things we do in life are not always exciting. I brush my teeth every morning and night but never stand in front of the mirror and consider that a thrill. Someday, however, if I'm old and rickety and still have a smile with real teeth, I'll be extra grateful for that discipline. Faith is similar in some ways.

Did Jesus have a last name? Yeah. Christ.

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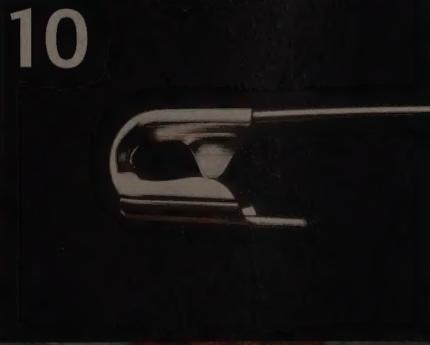
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Poetry and truth

What a delight to find Mary Oliver gracing the cover of the April 26 edition. And it was a treat to read Peter Marty's meditation on the quiet power of poetry ("In praise of poetry"). In commemoration of National Poetry Month, nine students of diverse backgrounds recently competed in a poetry slam at our local high school. The sharing of their words, both whimsical and profound, is as close to reverence and sacred community as I've seen in a public school setting.

Tim Chipman
Jacksonville, Ill.

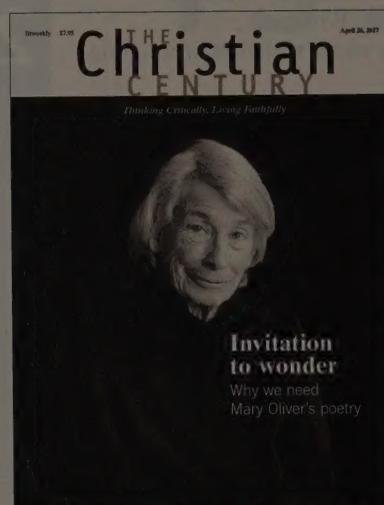
As a minister and poet, I very much appreciated Peter Marty's editorial. It helped instill the importance of what I try to do. The Galway Kinnell quote ("Perhaps poetry will be the canary in the mine shaft . . .") spoke to poetry's essential nature, and the Jane Kenyon quote ("The poet's job is to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in such a beautiful way that people cannot live without it") speaks to the poet's daunting task.

Michael Lyle
Purcellville, Va.

Baldwin's travels . . .

I was disappointed with Amy Frykholm's essay on James Baldwin ("Language in black and white," April 26). I read Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* back in the 1960s, as well as some of his novels and short stories, and his writings fascinated me. But I was puzzled that for all his railings against white America, he never visited the American South. Baldwin did not do much to right the wrongs that he saw.

David Dax
Lexington, Va.



The poor with us . . .

Thanks to Liz Theoharis for "The poor we have with us" (April 26), in which she reminds us of how important it is to read Jesus' words about the poor in the context of Deuteronomy. She begins with the oft-quoted saying of Jesus to his disciples, "For you always have the poor with you" (Matt. 26:11), as well as later acknowledging its Mark 14:7 parallel. The saying also appears in John 12.

The last time the John 12 text came up in the lectionary cycle, a ministry colleague of mine lamented how often she has heard parishioners take John 12:8 out of context as a license to avoid asking hard questions about poverty. In John, it is Judas—already a more demonic figure than he is in the synoptic Gospels—who protests Jesus' anointing when the expensive perfume could have been sold to benefit the poor. We're inclined to read this as a simple either/or choice: either the money will be used for Mary's act of devotion, or—at the suggestion of a "thief"—be used for the poor. The choice at first glance seems to be clear. But

John's audience knew better. It is not that concern for the poor is dismissed outright. Rather, given the urgency of the moment, with Jesus' death at hand, Mary's devotion takes precedence.

Thomas R. Lee
Missoula, Mont.

Christianity's success . . .

The interview with Larry Hurtado ("What made early Christians peculiar?" April 12) offered a lot of useful information that will help me as a teacher. In fact, as a Bible teacher for a number of years, I usually ask my students (mostly adults) why they think Christianity was successful with the citizens of Roman occupied territories, even in Rome itself in the early years of the faith. There is no historical documentation of this information. I like Hurtado's point about leadership. But even that doesn't explain Christianity's success. Common believers must have had something that was attractive outside of theological or pragmatic reasons.

Robert Turk
Fort Worth, Tex.

Police perspective . . .

Thank you for the insightful interview with officer Adam Plantinga ("A cop's view from the street," March 15). If only there were a way for all parties to just take a deep breath and pause for a moment before police and citizens begin their encounter. We do need to hold police accountable, and there have been too many horrific stories lately. However, we also have to have men and women willing to risk their lives to establish and maintain law and order in our communities.

Kathryn Haueisen
Cleveland, Ohio

May 24, 2017

The point of sanctuary cities

When Texas legislators cracked down on so-called sanctuary cities last month, they said they wanted to get dangerous undocumented immigrants off the streets. But Houston's police chief warned that the law would end up making Texas communities less safe. Art Acevedo said that lawmakers were asking him to go after "cooks and nannies instead of hardened criminals." He added: "We don't have the resources . . . nor the desire to be [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents."

Police officers understand that their work fighting crime is more effective when they aren't also enforcing immigration laws. That's why about 600 jurisdictions across the nation—including cities, counties, and states—have formally limited police involvement with ICE. These locales have been labeled *sanctuaries*, but that term misleadingly suggests that they shelter criminals or defy federal rules. In fact, police in these jurisdictions want to focus on the most dangerous criminals rather than on undocumented people who are just going about their everyday lives. Police know that if they act as ICE agents, turning routine traffic stops into deportation proceedings, they will lose the trust and cooperation of immigrant communities, which will undermine public safety for all. Police also know that undocumented immigrants are no more likely to commit crimes than the rest of the population.

The Police Executive Research Forum, a defender of sanctuary jurisdictions, cites the case of the undocumented man in Tucson who encountered a person trying to steal a car with children inside. The immigrant held the criminal long enough for police to arrive, then cooperated with detectives in the investigation. It's unlikely he would have gotten involved at all if he feared being charged and jailed for a violation of immigration law. The PERF also points to the work of a Catholic agency in Laredo, Texas, which provides shelter to victims of domestic violence, including women who are undocumented. Because the shelter has established trust with the police and the women, victims are willing to report crimes and more offenders are identified and prosecuted.

President Trump has sought to force police to work more closely with ICE by way of an executive order that withholds federal dollars from sanctuary cities. A judge in San Francisco has blocked that order, saying states and cities cannot be financially coerced into carrying out federal immigration policies.

That legal debate is about how the federal system operates. There is not much doubt about how local communities operate. Every day 11 million people without legal status live, work, and study in this country, and they drive cars, use hospitals, and interact with government officials. Sanctuary jurisdictions recognize what many politicians choose to ignore: when it comes to protecting health and safety, the lives of the documented and the undocumented are bound together.

Police are more effective at fighting crime when they aren't also enforcing immigration laws.

CENTURY marks

BRAIN SURGERY: William Barber II, a minister and political leader in North Carolina—who Cornel West claims is “the closest person we have to Martin Luther King Jr. in our midst”—talks little about his family. That’s partly to protect them, since he receives threats against his life. He and his wife, Rebecca, are the parents of five children. Twenty years ago, when an infant daughter was diagnosed with hydrocephalus, they secured the services of one of the finest neurosurgeons in the world—Ben Carson. The surgery was a success. The daughter recently graduated from college (*Esquire*, April 25).

ORGANIZERS: A small coalition of religious leaders who were fellows of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York are working to build a religious left and coordinate efforts to resist the policies of the Trump administration. The group includes Valarie Kaur, a Sikh activist; William Barber II, organizer of

the Moral Monday movement in North Carolina; Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Church’s first gay bishop; and Sister Simone Campbell, who leads the Nuns on the Bus social justice group. Organizing a religious left around a moral mission is daunting given the diversity of potential constituents. And there are far fewer religious liberals compared to a generation ago (*Washington Post*, April 26, and fiveThirtyEight.org, April 20).

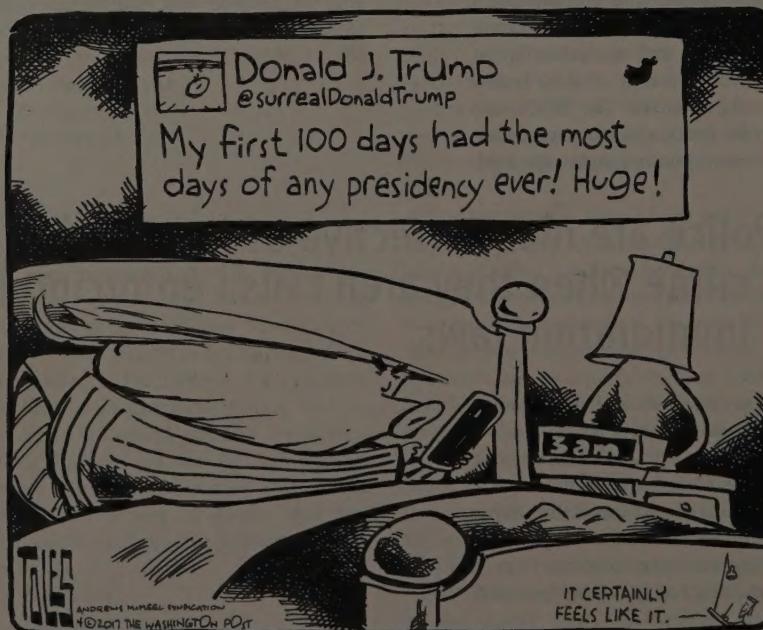
POWER OF THE WORD: Gallup recently polled people who attend church services at least monthly to see what factors they regarded as most important in attending church. Three out of four respondents said they go to church to hear sermons about the Bible or help them relate faith to their daily living. A majority said programs for children and youth and volunteer opportunities are also important. Of seven factors weighed in the Gallup

poll, music ranked as least important (Gallup, April 14).

ORGANISTS WANTED: As church organists retire, it’s increasingly difficult to find replacements, especially at small or rural congregations. A 2015 study by the American Guild of Organists revealed that 60 percent of its members were over 58 years old, and 58 percent had served the same congregation for at least 31 years. Those who train to be church organists are likely not going to want part-time positions in small congregations. The organ, some say, is particularly suited for leading congregational singing because, like the human voice, it is a breathing instrument (*Baltimore Sun*, April 7).

ONE BAPTISM: In a surprise move that was given no advance publicity, Pope Francis and Coptic Pope Tawadros II signed a joint declaration agreeing to recognize baptisms performed in the other’s church. The event took place in a cathedral in Alexandria which two weeks earlier was the site of a bombing that killed dozens. The two church leaders also committed themselves to stand against violence (*National Catholic Reporter*, April 28).

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT: Each day during the first 100 days of his presidency, President Trump received a short letter from a religious scholar stressing the moral obligations of the office of president. None of the letter writers cited any political affiliation. The campaign was organized by Rabbi Andrea L. Weiss, who teaches at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. In her letter to the president she drew on Micah 6:8, reminding the president that his job entailed doing justice and loving mercy (*LancasterOnline*, April 29).



TURNAROUND: With only ten members, Holy Cross Abbey, a Cistercian community in Berryville, Virginia, didn't seem to have much of a future. The way it was using its 1,200-acre property was also unsustainable. The community asked graduate students at the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment to study their enterprise and make recommendations. Among the suggestions the abbey has implemented: organic farming, a composting system, low-flow toilets, and a natural cemetery where people can be buried in only a shroud. Their turnaround story is told in the PBS documentary *Saving Place, Saving Grace* (*National Geographic*, April 21).

CHURCH GROWTH: The Christian church in Ghana is growing, and some claim it is becoming the center of the Christian world. In this West African country of 26 million people, 71 percent are Christian. Many Ghanaians attend worship service most weeknights, in addition to Sundays. Megachurches in the country serve as social hubs as well as spiritual centers. Today 41 percent of the world's 560 million Protestants are Africans, a figure that could reach 53 percent by 2050 (*The Week*, April 18).

RELIGIOUS GROWTH: Over the years the list of religions recognized by the Defense Department has grown from 100 to 221. It now includes earth-based faiths, such as heathenism, and an additional eight Protestant groups, including the International Communion of the Charismatic Christian Church. Jewish servicemen and women may now choose among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform instead of just the designation "Jewish." Adherents are guaranteed the same rights, privileges, and protections granted to those who are members of larger faith groups (RNS).

GRASSROOTS OPPOSITION: The Standing Rock Sioux lost their battle to stop the Keystone XL pipeline, but the pipeline faces another opposition group: Nebraska residents whose farms are in the path of the pipeline. Backed by conservation groups, the farmers say the project threatens prime farming and

“The unrealistic expectation that pastors and their families walk on water can only lead to deep disappointment and disillusionment, which can be lethal. Please stop expecting your pastor to be anything more than a frail and fragile human being like you.”

— Kay Warren, a cofounder of Saddleback Church and member of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, commenting on a cousin's spouse who took his own life after a church asked him to step down as pastor (*Washington Post*, April 21)

“Critics who claim Christian values have been removed from public schools are overlooking the witness and dedication of Christian teachers, counselors, administrators and coaches devoted to their students in public school classrooms.”

— Andrea Ramirez, executive director of the Faith and Education Coalition for the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, urging Christians not to abandon public schools (RNS)

grazing lands that are vital to Nebraska's economy and represents a foreign company's attempt to seize private property. TransCanada has won approval for the pipeline route in all of the U.S. states except Nebraska. The company says it has been unable to negotiate easements with landowners on about 9 percent of the 300-mile crossing (Reuters, April 20).

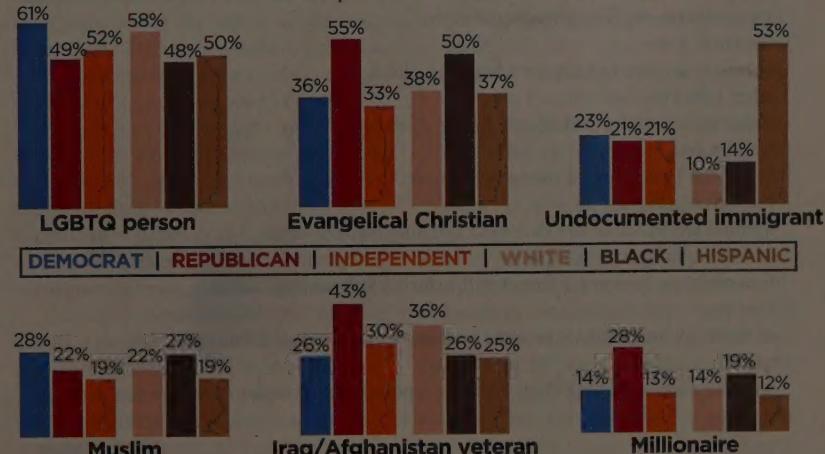
DIRTY BUSINESS: Bill McKibben, environmental activist and CHRISTIAN CENTURY editor at large, says Justin Trudeau, prime minister of Canada, is a

hypocrite on environmental issues: he declares his support for the environment, yet supports using oil from the Alberta tar sands, which McKibben says would be an environmental disaster. "No country would find 173 billion barrels of oil in the ground and just leave them there," Trudeau said, speaking of the tar sands oil—a line that earned him a standing ovation at an oil petroleum conference in Houston. The burning of that oil will use up a third of the earth's remaining carbon budget, a benchmark that Canada helped set (*Guardian*, April 17).

CLOSE TIES

SOURCE: HARVARD INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (WASHINGTON POST, APRIL 25)

People who claim close relationships with persons who fit these descriptions:



So what if I think injustice is wrong?

Antiracist without sacrifice

by Teri McDowell Ott

LAST YEAR Eddie Glaude Jr., who teaches religion and African-American studies at Princeton, gave a lecture at the college I serve as chaplain. Afterward I joined a group of students and faculty to discuss the issues he raised. Our conversation ranged about freely but mostly circled around mass incarceration, police violence against black males, and the housing crisis in African-American communities.

Sitting across from me was an African-American student with short dreadlocks and a red T-shirt. I knew this young man,

Denton, only by my professor husband's admiration of his work as a philosophy major. After listening for quite a while, he finally spoke up. "Well," Denton said with a little shake of his head, "I pretty much think that white people created these problems, and so white people need to fix them. That burden should not be on us."

His words were understated yet damning, and they silenced the room. As the chaplain, I struggled to come up with an appropriate response. I wanted Denton to know that I was on his side. I also

wondered if I really was. I didn't want to express my guilt over being a part of the problem, as such confessional statements seem to be primarily about me and my need for redemption. And redemption requires an honest desire for change—change for which I was unprepared. I wanted to know what exactly needed to change, what I needed to give up.

I also didn't want to come across as a self-congratulating white antiracist—as the one who clearly understood Denton, unlike those ignorant white people who don't. So I just sat there, wondering what to do, what to say, and who to be.

This wasn't the first time I struggled to find an appropriate response to a person of color. My background left me woefully unprepared for such conversations. I grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods, schools, and churches. My family moved around Michigan every few years as my father was promoted to higher positions at his bank. As a teenager I moved to the affluent Detroit suburb Bloomfield Hills, which my parents chose for its high school. Our house, a two-story colonial in a cul-de-sac, was a relatively modest one for the neighborhood. One of the Detroit Pistons lived nearby, in a palatial estate protected by a brick wall and a black iron gate. I don't remember any other black neighbors.

Something happens to us when we grow up without people of color around. We are habituated to a white world in which people of color will always appear to be strange, different, and other. Stereotypes are fed because there is no one nearby to dispel them. Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Jackie Joyner-Kersee were my models of black life and culture. So, I reasoned, all black people have rhythm, can dance, and are

The farm wife collects frequent flyer miles

I find my seat
on a gray plank and grasp
stout rope tied
to a sycamore branch. Leaning
back, I pump
till I'm lifting off over barbed wire,
dusty beans,
six-foot corn, my legs stretched to spin
the rusty
rooster's arrows. I reach for what I see and
what I don't—
The wind in my face whispers, *Esther, Esther.*
Or is it you,
my heart, pumping as I pump that speaks? "I'm here,"
I say, like faithful
Samuel answered in the darkness. Leaning into the arms
of this world
that push me forward, I forget stiff arthritis and varicose veins.
I let go
of the back and forth of brooms and mops, sweepers and irons and just
rock
with the bliss a rocking chair rocks or a pendulum swinging from the sun.

Shari Wagner

athletic. When my track team's bus transported us to a predominantly black school closer to the city, I instinctively assumed that I couldn't win against those athletes.

But as much as I admired and coveted these stereotypical black traits, I also knew that I did not want to be black. Being black, according to the news, also meant being poor and dangerous. When my family ventured into the city, I carefully guarded my purse. When black males went by I felt my body respond instinctively by going rigid and tense.

I know better now, but that does not always mean that I act better. Most times I don't act at all, impaired as I am by my ignorance, my uncertainty as to what would be helpful, and my deeply engrained habits. And the way society works—basically, in my favor—I don't have to do much. As philosopher Shannon Sullivan reveals in *Good White People*:

I didn't want the rage and resentment to include me. But of course it did.

The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism, in order to be counted as a good white person today I simply need to be against racism. I do not have to do so at my own expense, and certainly not at the peril of my own white people. There's no need for me to work toward the goal of ending racial injustice; it's enough for me to be recognized as antiracist.

My first chance to act on these antiracist principles arose when I was 16. My father needed to join a country club so he could entertain clients on the golf course. I remember the decision being difficult, because my parents were not country club types. They didn't believe in the extravagance and weren't going to build their social lives around their membership. They shopped around and were considering joining a club in nearby Birmingham, Michigan.

Then I learned that this club did not welcome African Americans as members, and I confronted my father about it. I don't remember the scene exactly, only the feeling that this was wrong. But he loves to tell the story, with a note of pride about how his daughter threw such a fit



over this racial injustice that my parents decided to join a different, less exclusive club instead, one a little farther from home. I adored this recognition from my father. And from this experience I learned that acting as an antiracist didn't

have to cost anything more than a slightly longer trip to the country club.

After Glaude's lecture at our college, he paused to take a question from a white professor. The question soon turned into a speech, the point of which seemed to be to inform everyone what a good enlightened liberal she was. The speech was couched in a message for our students of color: they should share their experiences so others could learn from them. "I tell my students to teach me, to help me learn," she concluded passionately, as if expecting a round of applause.

Glaude paused for a moment. Then, slowly and more graciously than was warranted, he said, "You know, it's *tiring* trying to teach people all the time. There are books you can read." And the black and Latino students in the room exploded in spontaneous, raucous applause.

Glaude's comment led me to read James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*. I was immediately pulled in to the craft of Baldwin's prose—his detailed scenes, his layered structure, his profound honesty and self-awareness. I was thoroughly

enjoying getting to know Baldwin's work—until I came to a scene that brought me to an abrupt stop.

In the title essay, Baldwin describes the rage, the blind fever that finally overcame him after he was repeatedly turned away from restaurants and diners because of the color of his skin. In one restaurant, a young white waitress with "great, astounded, frightened eyes" was sent to tell the hungry Baldwin that he would not be fed. Baldwin writes:

She did not ask me what I wanted, but repeated, as though she had learned it somewhere, "We don't serve Negroes here." She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown so accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice, and fear. This made me colder and more murderous than ever.... Somehow, with the repetition of that phrase, which was already ringing in my head like a thousand bells of a nightmare, I realized that she would never come any closer and that I would have to strike from a distance. There was nothing on the table but an ordinary water-mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her.

Baldwin's raw, violent anger upended me. At first I did not want to understand, because to understand the rage would make it acceptable—and it was too frightening for me to accept it. I fought

Teri McDowell Ott is chaplain at Monmouth College in Illinois.

with myself, tempted to close the book on Baldwin. How easy it would be to dismiss him as just another dangerous black man.

I couldn't close the book, though,

because I found myself in Baldwin's story. The white waitress could have been me. She followed the norms and rules set by white society; she did as her employers

told her to do. She was sorry for what she knew was wrong, but not sorry enough to change or rebel. The dark stranger at her table may have frightened her, but she was more afraid of what she risked losing as a good white woman—her job, her reputation, her position of privilege.

She felt powerless, even though she wasn't. She had a voice, but she used it only to perpetuate her own domination. She had a body, but no muscle of hers moved to cross the line of segregation. She didn't act, she didn't speak up or out, because she knew that this angry black man had more to fear from the restaurant full of white people and its white owners and the white police officers who would come when *she* called. It was safe for her to do nothing. So though she empathized with Baldwin's plight, she offered him nothing more than a tone of apology as she rejected him like everyone else.

Sitting at the desk in my home office, holding Baldwin's book open to this page, I stared blankly out the window overlooking the green of our neighbor's yard and felt the full effect of this confrontation. I felt unbalanced, uprooted from my position of safety and privilege. I didn't want Baldwin's rage and resentment to include me. But of course it did. And this, I believe, is when the first flicker of understanding lit within my mind. I had to feel the heat of this rage before I could even begin to appreciate the nightmare of the African-American experience.

Baldwin later came to terms with his anger, noting the destructive nature of hatred, which "never fails to destroy the man who hate[s]." But he also wrote that "there is not a Negro alive who does not have [this rage] in his blood." And I recalled hearing it, though in more restrained form, simmering in the voices of students like Denton who are frustrated and tired, angry and resentful that here, in 2016, white people still fail to understand.

Rage can consume and destroy, but it can also serve as a pure, refining fire, burning away all that blinds us to the reality of human suffering. I think of the story where Jesus enters the temple and, in a fit of rage, overturns the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sell doves. I wonder if those confronted by Jesus' rage listened. I wonder if we good white people will, too.

Fruit of the vine

Rainbow or no rainbow,
I'd have gotten drunk too,
more than a year lost,
an ark full of animals,
the whole earth renewed.
What better cause
for celebration,
what better way
than wine, sure sign
new life can spring
from destruction, the way
grapes must be crushed,
their juice fermented
to be filled with spirit.

Hardly fair to Noah
to focus on his lone slip
after all those years
of strict obedience
of looking ridiculous,
his dignity swept away.
Still, to have built the ark!
All those years of waiting,
faith and complacency growing
too difficult to discriminate.

What ripened such resentment?
The son's spirit crushed
by years of public shame,
all that dung to shovel,
his whole life sacrificed
to a father's savior complex
which, proving true,
made matters worse.

How good to see
the unbending old man
out of control,
how good to laugh
without constraint.
Such dainty brothers
to avert their eyes,
vain show of propriety
to cover their pride,
the old man finally exposed
cursing the only son
who saw through his disguise.

Eric Potter

UMC court rules against consecrating gay bishops

At the end of the day, Karen Oliveto remains a bishop even after the United Methodist Church's top court ruled that consecrating a gay bishop violates church law.

The Judicial Council said that such a bishop would still be in "good standing" until a local administrative or judicial process is completed.

"It has been a very stressful time of waiting—waiting for clarity," Oliveto said. "I'm very excited that I get to continue to do the job God has called me to do and that the community has affirmed—and that we get to return to the Mountain Sky Area to work with clergy and laity there."

The decision is being greeted with confusion but also with hope by some that the Commission on a Way Forward, created to review church law on sexuality and search for ways to maintain unity, has time to do its work.

"We acknowledge that the decision does not help to ease the disagreements, impatience, and anxiety that permeates the United Methodist Church over the matter of human sexuality, and particularly this case," said Bruce R. Ough, president of the Council of Bishops.

Officials in the U.S. Western Jurisdiction consecrated Oliveto, who is married to another woman, as a bishop in July 2016. She leads the Mountain Sky Area, which encompasses Colorado, Montana, Utah, Wyoming, and one church in Idaho.

"A same-sex marriage license issued by competent civil authorities together with the clergy person's status in a same-sex relationship is a public declaration that the person is a self-avowed practicing homosexual" for purposes of the prohibitive language in the United Methodist Book of Discipline in regard to who can be ordained, the council ruled.

The Judicial Council also decided

during its April 25–28 session that United Methodist boards of ordained ministry must look at whether a ministerial candidate adheres to the church's position on sexuality.

Dixie Brewster, the South Central Jurisdiction lay delegate who brought the petition asking about a gay bishop's election, said she was pleased with the decision and thankful to the Judicial Council.

"It gives us specific and faithful direction in determining our future as United Methodists," she said.

While she expressed disappointment that Oliveto remains a bishop, she said she understands that the church allows fair process.

"My prayer is that Oliveto will step down and not create further division within the church," Brewster said.

Bishops from the Western Jurisdiction said in a statement that they are already working to respond to complaints filed after Oliveto's election.

"We're not trying to skirt this or defy the church," said Grant Hagiya, head of the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops and a member of the Commission on a Way Forward.

Groups who advocate for the current church teachings on sexuality, such as the Wesleyan Covenant Association and Good News, expressed skepticism that the Western Jurisdiction would follow through on complaints against Oliveto. Some see the ruling as leaving open the possibility that the jurisdiction could stall on a response or choose not to remove Oliveto.

"We don't have any hope—because of its past track record—that the



PHOTO BY MIKE DURRANCE, UMNS

MUTUAL PRAYER: Karen Oliveto (left) meets Dixie Brewster (right) prior to the opening of oral arguments before the United Methodist Judicial Council meeting in Newark, New Jersey. Brewster was the petitioner who pressed the question of whether a gay or lesbian pastor such as Oliveto can serve as a UMC bishop. They both said they were praying for each other and the church. Behind them is Keith Boyette, president of the Wesleyan Covenant Association, which advocates keeping current church teachings. He represented Brewster before the council.

Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops will address this either swiftly or with integrity," said Rob Renfroe, president of Good News. If that is the outcome, he said, the Way Forward commission must take into account "that we are at least two different churches and that some kind of compromise that cobbles us together... is not going to work as a way forward."

Matt Berryman, the executive director of Reconciling Ministries Network, a group that has worked to overturn church teachings on sexuality, also does not expect that the Western bishops will remove Oliveto from her role.

"Given the strong leadership in this jurisdiction, it seems highly unlikely she will be removed from her ministry as a result of a trial," he wrote in a blog post. "Depending on the actions of individuals and committees moving forward, it can be argued that the Judicial Council rulings are practically meaningless."

Berryman, who is also a member of the Way Forward commission, sees the rulings as "stops along the way to inclusion."

John K. Yambasu, bishop for Sierra Leone in the UMC, which is a global body, agreed with the Judicial Council that Oliveto's consecration violates church law. But he was glad the matter goes back to the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops for supervisory response, rather than resulting in immediate removal of Oliveto as bishop.

Her immediate removal would have created "more wounds" in the church, he said. "This decision will give us time—maybe to pray over our situations and to talk to one another."

Ken Carter, Florida Conference bishop and one of the moderators of the Way Forward commission, does not see the ruling as impeding the commission's goal of a response that "is not so focused on a person or supervisory issues," he said. "What the General Conference does in 2019 and 2020 will really shape the church" and provide a response to varied understandings of LGBTQ people in the church.

Lonnie Brooks, a lay member of the Alaska Conference who wrote a brief supporting the Western Jurisdiction, sees it differently.

"I fully believe that this decision will increase the pressure on the commission to propose a plan of separation to General Conference," Brooks said. —Kathy L. Gilbert, Linda Bloom, and Sam Hodges, United Methodist News Service

Representatives of the group countered that such testimony had been prepared ahead of time to advance the state's arguments, TASS said.

Jehovah's Witnesses representatives said they will appeal the decision, according to TASS. The organization's spokesman said if the appellate panel of Supreme Court judges upheld Thursday's verdict, the case would be taken to the European Court of Human Rights.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which has some 175,000 followers in Russia, first legally registered as a religious group in Russia in 1991 and reregistered in 1999, according to the organization's international website.

The case reached the Supreme Court following a lawsuit by Russia's Justice Ministry.

In February, investigators inspected the headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses in St. Petersburg, the independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported. More than 70,000 pages of documents were confiscated for the General Prosecutor's Office, according to Russia's SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, which monitors hate crimes and the enforcement of antiextremist laws.

The religious group's press service said its religious programs do not include banned materials and that officials have notified authorities whenever anyone brings such literature into their building. In 2009, the Supreme Court of Russia upheld a lower court ruling that declared 34 pieces of Jehovah's Witnesses literature as "extremist," including their magazine the *Watchtower* in Russian.

The group has been officially banned from the port city of Taganrog since 2009, after a local court ruled the organization guilty of inciting religious hatred by "propagating the exclusivity and supremacy" of their religion, according to the British newspaper the *Independent*.

In 2015, a court in Rostov convicted 16 Jehovah's Witnesses of practicing extremism in Taganrog. The court handed out jail sentences—later suspended—of more than five years for five of the defendants and stiff fines for the others.

That same year, the Supreme Court of Russia banned the religion's international website as "extremist." —Doug Stanglin, *USA Today*

Russia's top court bans Jehovah's Witnesses

Russia's Supreme Court formally banned Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization and ordered the state to seize its property in Russia, according to Russian news media.

The court, after six days of hearings, ordered the closing of the group's Russia headquarters and its 395 local chapters on April 20.

The Interfax news agency quoted Justice Ministry attorney Svetlana Borisova in court as saying the Jehovah's Witnesses pose a threat to Russians.

"They pose a threat to the rights of the citizens, public order, and public security," she told the court.

Borisova also said the Jehovah's Witnesses' opposition to blood transfusions violates Russian health-care laws.

"We are greatly disappointed by this development and deeply concerned about how this will affect our religious activity," said Yaroslav Sivulskiy, a spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. "We will appeal this decision, and we hope that our legal rights and protections as a peaceful religious group will be fully restored as soon as possible."

In a statement on its website, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia said, "This decision may lead to very dire consequences for the faithful of different religions, as well as for Russia's image in the world arena."

During the hearing, one witness, identified as Natalia Koretskaya from St. Petersburg, testified that she was a member of the group from 1995 to 2009, TASS news agency reported. She said top church officials purported to enforce church rules "but in real fact the talk is about total control of an individual's personal life—his intimate life, education, and work."

U.S. commission: Russia among worst violators of religious freedom

The State Department should add Russia to its list of the worst violators of religious freedom, a U.S. commission declared in its annual report.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, founded to advise the federal government, cites the most abusive countries each year, a list consistently longer than the State Department's.

USCIRF recommended that the United States designate Russia as a "country of particular concern" for wielding an antiextremist law to violate the religious freedom of Muslims and other minorities.

Most recently, Russia banned Jehovah's Witnesses, labeling them "extremist" and ordering the state to seize their properties.

"They're treating these people like they're terrorists," said Tom Reese, a Jesuit priest who chairs USCIRF, referring to Russia's treatment of the Witnesses. "They're pacifists, they don't want to be involved in politics, and they just want to be left alone. The Supreme Court [in Russia] has basically said they're illegal."

On April 26, the same day as the report's release, the commission's vice chair publicized his dissent, which criticized the commission for failing to investigate Israel for discriminating against Muslims, Christians, and non-Orthodox Jews.

"I did not look for this issue, it came to us," said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute, who cited a lengthy study from young lawyers in the West Bank that concluded that Israel fails to meet international standards on religious freedom on which other nations are judged. Those petitioning for an investigation were often dismissed as anti-Semites, and some commissioners feared the commission would lose congressional support, he said.

Reese said that USCIRF investigations require a majority vote of the commission.

Globally, "the commission has concluded that the state of affairs for inter-

national religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations," Reese said.

USCIRF's list this year differs from its 2016 list with the addition of Russia, but also in dropping Egypt and Iraq. Reese said that while violence against Christians in those nations remains a problem, the commission wanted to highlight the concrete steps that both the Egyptian and Iraqi governments have taken to protect religious minorities.

Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi "consistently has made noteworthy public statements and gestures encouraging religious tolerance and moderation, has condemned sectarian attacks and assisted victims, and has urged reform of textbooks and religious discourse in society, an important shift in tone and rhetoric from his predecessors."

Still, Egypt and Iraq are on USCIRF's list of Tier 2 countries, which are considered violators of religious freedom, but not at the same level as the countries of particular concern. For 2017 the worst violators are Burma (Myanmar), Central African Republic, China, Eritrea, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

—Lauren Markoe, Religion News Service



CHURCH-STATE DISPUTE: Gravel covers the playground of Trinity Lutheran Church's Child Learning Center in Columbia, Missouri, in October. The state of Missouri told the church it was ineligible for a tax-funded program to use recycled tires for the playground, and the church took its case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Justice Neil Gorsuch in April may not have been decisive.

"It does seem as though . . . this is a clear burden on a constitutional right," said Justice Elena Kagan during oral arguments April 19, referring to the state's refusal to treat Trinity Lutheran Church as equal to other nonprofits seeking state grants, given that the church met all the neutral criteria for the program.

If the high court were to rule against the church on such a safety issue, said Justice Stephen Breyer, "we proliferate litigation forever in areas that are critical, like police, fire, health," from aggrieved religious institutions seeking to participate in secular activities.

Such comments raised the possibility that the court would rule 7-2 in favor of the church, though perhaps on narrow grounds, so as not to set a broad, nationwide precedent on public funding for religious institutions. Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor did not seem inclined to support any such funding.

The case dates back to 2012, when the Columbia, Missouri, church applied for a state grant to replace the pea-gravel surface of its child learning center's playground with material made from recycled tires. It placed fifth among 44 applicants, 14 of which were awarded grants. The

Supreme Court may lean toward Lutheran school in public funds dispute

In a case with implications for more than 30 states that prohibit using public funds for religious purposes, a majority of Supreme Court justices appeared aligned against Missouri's refusal to include a Lutheran church in a grant program that provides funding to resurface playgrounds and make them safer.

The high court had delayed hearing the case for nearly a year after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia, perhaps because of fears that the eight remaining justices would split along ideological lines, as they have in some cases involving religious liberties. But the addition of

church was passed over based on a provision of the state constitution.

The church's lawsuit soon became a cause célèbre among some supporters of religious freedom, led by the Alliance Defending Freedom, which took its case to court. It lost at the federal district and appellate court levels, but the Supreme Court's decision in January 2016 to hear the case was seen as a positive sign. Then Scalia died the next month, prompting the court to delay hearing the case.

Gorsuch's confirmation wasn't the only late-breaking event, however. Missouri's new Republican governor, Eric Greitens, in mid-April reversed the state policy and said churches will be eligible for such grants in the future. That led some justices to wonder if Trinity's challenge was unnecessary.

"If we have no adversity, hasn't this case become mooted?" Sotomayor asked James Layton, the state's former solicitor general, who argued in favor of the religious exclusion.

The church raised two central claims in court papers. It said the exclusion violates the First Amendment's protection against policies prohibiting the free exercise of religion, as well as the 14th Amendment's promise of equal protection for all.

"This is clearly singling out a religious organization with no justification to do so," said David Cortman, the Alliance Defending Freedom senior counsel who argued the church's case.

If the Supreme Court were to rule against the church, its supporters say, that could give states justification to deny funds for other services, ranging from police and fire protection to soup kitchens and battered women's shelters. The conservative Institute for Justice says 1.3 million students in school-choice programs could be affected.

Justice Samuel Alito, one of the court's staunchest defenders of religious freedom, cited a series of examples to illustrate that Missouri's exclusion of religious groups could extend to funding that protects against school violence. He and others wondered how those programs could be denied but not police and fire protection, which are required under the Constitution's equal protection clause.

If police and fire protection must be provided to the church, Breyer asked, how can the state "deny money to the same place for helping children not fall in the playground, cut their knees, get tetanus, break a leg, et cetera? What's the difference?"

Layton, who worked for the state's prior Democratic administration, defended the policy as treating all religions and religious groups the same. While the free exercise clause requires that the state not interfere with the church's activities, it does not require state funding, he said.

"We don't want to be in a position," Layton said, "where we are selecting among churches." —Richard Wolf, *USA Today*

Georgetown University apologizes for its role in historical slave trade

The leader of the Catholic religious order that helped found Georgetown University sought forgiveness from descendants of slaves whose sale bolstered the school financially.

"Today the Society of Jesus, which helped to establish Georgetown University and whose leaders enslaved and mercilessly sold your ancestors, stands before you to say, We have greatly sinned, in our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done and in what we have failed to do," said Timothy Kesicki, president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

Georgetown recently acknowledged it benefited from the sale of more than 250 slaves in 1838 to pay off its debts. On April 18, it apologized for its role in the slave trade during a "liturgy of remembrance, contrition, and hope."

More than 100 descendants of those slaves attended the ceremony, jointly hosted by the school, the Jesuit order, and the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C. One of the families' representatives said penance is required, even as forgiveness is sought.

"Penance is very important," said



PAST YET PRESENT: Delores Williams Johnson of Union Park, Illinois, and her great-niece Denise Neal of San Diego, two descendants of Isaac Hawkins, a slave sold by Maryland Jesuits for the benefit of Georgetown University, attended an April 18 ceremony at Georgetown during which building was renamed in Hawkins's honor. The Jesuit order also apologized and asked forgiveness from the descendants of the slaves.

Sandra Green Thomas, president of the GU272 Descendants Association. "Penance is required when you have violated God's law."

In 1838, the school was involved in the sale of 272 slaves who worked on Jesuit plantations in southern Maryland. The sale benefited that state's Jesuits and paid off debts at the nation's oldest Catholic university.

The liturgy was steeped in symbolism. It was held two days after Easter, which this year coincided with Emancipation Day, a holiday that marks the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia on April 16, 1862.

The day's events, which also included the rededication of two buildings, were sparked by a 104-page report from a working group of students and faculty looking at this part of the school's history. The school decided to name one building Isaac Hawkins Hall, in honor of a slave who was 65 years old when he was sold in 1838. His name was the first of the slaves listed on the sale documents, and most of his children and grandchildren were also sold to Louisiana businessmen.

Hawkins's labor helped build Georgetown and rescue it from finan-

cial crisis, according to the working group report.

A second building became Anne Marie Becroft Hall in honor of a free African-American woman who founded a school for Catholic black girls in the Georgetown neighborhood and later joined the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the oldest group of nuns started by women of African descent.

Previously, those buildings were named for Thomas Mulledy and William McSherry, respectively, former university presidents who were priests and supporters of the slave trade.

Isaac Hawkins Hall is part of a residential complex that houses more than 140 students and a chaplain. Anne Marie Becroft Hall, the oldest building on campus, is a meditation center for students, staff, and faculty.

The school announced previously it would give preferential status in the admissions process to descendants of the enslaved.

In its report, the working group recommended that university and Jesuit officials apologize for its history related to slavery, calling it “a precondition for reconciliation” and an action that can lead to more debate and discussion.

Although Kesicki said he sought forgiveness from the slave descendants, he noted, “we have no right to it.”

Some of the descendants were ready to offer forgiveness, including Jeremy Alexander, a university employee who recently learned he was related to some of the slaves who were sold.

“I am willing to forgive,” said Alexander, who works in the school’s Office of Technology and Commercialization. “That was a lot for them to take those steps to say that they were sorry publicly.”

But even with that willingness to “move forward with this healing process,” he said, “it’s not over,” and society’s inequalities still need to be addressed.

Two descendants of Isaac Hawkins, Delores Williams Johnson of Union Park, Illinois, and her great-niece Denise Neal of San Diego, weren’t ready to forgive.

“It has taken a lot of effort on the descendants’ parts to push Georgetown and the Jesuits to acknowledge us and not dictate to us,” Williams Johnson said.

“There has to be ongoing, meaningful conversation.”

The working group recommended that university officials meet with descendants and work toward greater diversity on the campus.

Georgetown president John J. DeGioia, who also apologized during the ceremony, began visiting descendants in the summer, and the school created a department of African-American stud-

ies in June. In March, the university hosted a consortium of two dozen U.S. and Canadian universities that are examining the history of slavery at their schools.

A booklet distributed for the liturgy and dedication events stated, “Outreach and collaboration with the descendant community will continue over the months, years, and decades to come.” —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

More education doesn't mean less religious commitment among Christians, Pew says

IT’S A POPULAR BELIEF: the more educated a person is, the less religious he or she likely will be. And it’s mostly right, but with exceptions, according to a recently released analysis of Pew Research Center surveys.

“I think the answer is, ‘Well, it’s complicated,’ ” said Gregory Smith. “On the one hand, if you just look at the public as a whole, there’s no question people with the highest levels of educational attainment tend to be less religious than those with lower levels of educational attainment.”

Fewer than half of college graduates, or 46 percent, say religion is “very important” in their lives, compared with 53 percent of those who have completed some college and 58 percent of those with no more than a high school education, according to Pew. College grads also are less likely to say they believe in God “with absolute certainty” and pray daily.

The big “however,” Smith said, is that Christians—the majority (71 percent) of American adults—don’t seem to fit the pattern at all.

Christians with higher levels of education (70 percent, combining all measures) appear to be just as religious as those with less schooling (73 percent of those with some college and 71 percent with some high school), according to the analysis. They are almost equally likely at all education levels to pray daily, attend worship services weekly, and say they believe in God with absolute certainty.

In fact, highly educated Christians are most likely (52 percent) to say they are weekly churchgoers, compared with 45 percent of those with some college and 46 percent with at least some high school, according to Pew.

Fully three-quarters of college graduates still are affiliated with some religion, not much different from those with some college (76 percent) or high school (78 percent), for example, according to Pew. College graduates also report attending weekly religious services at similar rates as Americans with less education.

But more college graduates identify as atheist or agnostic: 11 percent, compared with 8 percent with some college and 4 percent of those with no more than a high school education, according to the analysis. Those aren’t large numbers, but Smith pointed out that college graduates are still almost three times as likely to identify as atheist or agnostic than those who have no more than a high school education.

While none of the numbers are huge, they are statistically significant, he said. Most of the data analyzed comes from Pew’s 2014 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of more than 35,000 Americans reached on randomly dialed cell phones and landlines. The margin of error for results based on the full sample in that survey is plus or minus 0.6 percentage points. —Emily McFarlan Miller, Religion News Service



■ **Wendell Griffen**, an Arkansas circuit judge who also serves as a Baptist pastor, defended his participation in a death penalty protest after issuing a court order barring the state from using an execution drug.

His ruling had nothing to do with his views on capital punishment, Griffen wrote in a blog post April 19. He was preparing to join other members of New Millennium Church in Little Rock for a Good Friday prayer vigil outside the Arkansas Governor's Mansion when he received a motion seeking a temporary restraining order to block the first of a series of executions scheduled to begin the day after Easter.

The party bringing the complaint claimed the Arkansas Department of Corrections had purchased vecuronium bromide—one of three drugs used in the state's execution protocol—illegally under false pretenses and wanted the product returned. Griffen focused on facts and the law, he wrote.

"I was not supposed to think about whether making the correct legal decision would be popular to anyone," Griffen wrote. "That is what judges do, whether we support or oppose capital punishment."

Griffen determined the facts showed the drug's distributor risked imminent and irreparable harm and had a legal claim likely enough to succeed to order the state not to use or dispose of the drug until a hearing. He then went to the

protest, where for an hour and a half he lay on a cot, posing as a dead man "in solidarity with Jesus, the leader of our religion who was put to death by crucifixion by the Roman Empire."

Death penalty supporters responded to the judge's actions by calling for his impeachment. The Arkansas Supreme Court removed Griffen from all pending death penalty and lethal injection cases "to ensure that all are given a fair and impartial tribunal."

Arkansas executed four men in late April. In early May, the state medical board announced it would investigate the purchase of the lethal injection drugs.

The Arkansas high court has also referred Griffen to the state's Judicial Discipline and Disability Commission to determine whether he violated the Code of Judicial Conduct requiring judges to "maintain the dignity of judicial office at all times, and avoid both impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in their professional and personal lives" and conduct themselves in ways that ensure "the greatest possible public confidence in their independence, impartiality, integrity, and confidence."

Griffen said whether or not the drug distributor was entitled to a temporary restraining order, he himself is entitled to be part of a Good Friday vigil.

"I am entitled to practice my religion—whether I am a judge or not—even if others disapprove of the way I practice it," he said.

Griffen denounced secrecy in the execution process at a session on the death penalty at last year's Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Greensboro, North Carolina.

"If you want to euthanize your dog, you know that under your state only the people who have certain credentials can put your dog down," Griffen said. Yet it is extremely challenging to find the qualifications of those who execute people, he said.

"As a matter of fact, there is no requirement that the state tell you, and they have an affirmative obligation to not disclose that," the judge continued. "One would call it irony, but it's too nice a word."

Griffen has long argued that his judi-

cial role does not negate his responsibility to speak prophetically as a pastor, often leading to clashes with political opponents.

As a member of the Arkansas Court of Appeals appointed in 1996, Griffen clashed with the Arkansas Judicial Discipline and Disability Commission over comments in 2002 criticizing the racial diversity practices at the University of Arkansas. The ethics panel eventually dropped its case against Griffen, but he was voted out of office in 2008. In 2010, he was elected as circuit judge for the Fifth Division in Arkansas and reelected in 2016.

Recently he opposed a proposal to increase public funding of the Little Rock School District, protesting a 2015 takeover by the Arkansas Board of Education after the dissolution of a majority-black school board elected by voters. —Bob Allen, Baptist News Global

■ **Linda A. Livingstone** has been named president of Baylor University, beginning June 1. She will be the first woman to head the Christian institution in Waco, Texas, founded by Baptists.

Livingstone is currently dean of the school of business at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Among her previous positions, she taught at Baylor as part of the business faculty from 1991 to 2002.

"Baylor's unique culture of care and compassion—that I experienced personally from my colleagues and that I saw demonstrated among faculty, staff, and students—continues to inspire and influence me as an administrator," she said in a statement. "When I had the opportunity to come back, I felt this was really where God was calling me."

The board of regents selected Livingstone unanimously, the school wrote in a statement.

Livingstone's tenure begins as the school deals with reports of rape, sexual assault, and harassment in recent years and faces federal lawsuits filed by former students. Several student athletes have been charged and found guilty. Ken



PHOTO COURTESY OF BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

Starr's term as president of Baylor ended in May 2016 amid allegations of mishandling the situation, and the school fired its head football coach.

"At Baylor, we're going to do the right things," Livingstone told the *Baptist Standard*. "We're going to do everything we can to provide a safe and healthy environment for all our students. I'm committed to that." —the CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

■ **Frederick Houk Borsch**, a bishop, academic, and advocate for social justice, died April 11 at age 81.

Borsch died of complications from myelodysplastic syndrome at his home in Philadelphia, according to the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, where he served as bishop from 1988 to 2002.

He also taught New Testament and Anglican studies at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, Seabury-Western Seminary, and General Theological Seminary. He was dean of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley and dean of the chapel and religious life at Princeton University.

Peter W. Marty, the CHRISTIAN CENTURY's publisher, who met Borsch during his tenure as interim dean at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, said Borsch "wove pastoral instinct and theological scholarship into everything he did with an ease that was so enviable. He was erudite without being stuffy, an intellectual who understood the urgency for justice, and a humble guy who listened well. I always admired the way he could take a biblical text and reveal all kinds of little divine surprises by simply turning it inside out. He was a tremendous gift to the church."

In a 1971 article in the CENTURY, Borsch examined how Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature uses animal symbolism to "depersonalize and dehumanize the enemy."

"The monster and its minions, conceived as superhuman in power but subhuman in their bestiality, merited none of the understanding and tolerance due one's fellows," he wrote. "No quarter

need be granted such implacable and corrupt beings, no redemption envisioned for them."

In a 1985 essay, Borsch recounted surviving a plane crash that killed two others. When friends suggested that God had rescued him, Bosch said that rather than intervening to save all but a few, the Spirit shares in suffering and seeks to transform it.

"For some people such a God may seem rather weak," he wrote. "But for others this is the God who is always present to the world and to whom we are always present. Whether the plane lands or goes over the end, whether we live or die, this God—even in the valley of the shadow of death—is always with us." —the CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

■ **David G. Buttrick**, best known as "a master of homiletic design," died April 22, at age 89. His obituary did not give a cause of death.

Buttrick was professor of homiletics at Vanderbilt Divinity School for almost 20 years and also taught at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Iliff School of Theology, among other schools.

"David was passionate about the art of preaching and a prolific scholar," Dean Emilie Townes of Vanderbilt Divinity said in a statement. "He influenced many generations of great homiletics and was a consultant on worship to the Commission on Church Unity and to several Protestant denominations."

Buttrick authored many essays and articles as well as 19 books, including the three-volume project *Speaking Parables, Speaking Jesus, and Speaking Conflict*.

Much preaching in past decades, beginning with Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, has seen the kingdom of God as utopian and optimistic, Buttrick said in a 2011 interview with *Homiletics Online*. "The theme of the kingdom of God was always what Jesus was preaching," he said. "The 20th century lopped it right off." As a result, Christianity lost its eschatology, and when that happens, preaching about God's mighty acts starts to be in the past tense, he said.

"Biblical passages in themselves betray a movement of thought, whereas traditional homiletic, particularly coming out of the 19th century and into the 20th century, was static, point-making," Buttrick said. "The question is how to create language that moves in consciousness and forms and changes people." —the CHRISTIAN CENTURY staff

■ **Alvin Plantinga**, 84, a pioneering advocate for theism as a serious philosophical position within academic circles, has been named the winner of the 2017 Templeton Prize.

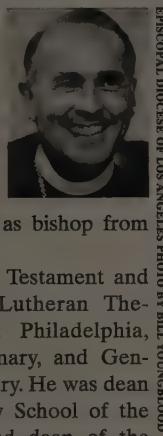
Heather Templeton Dill, president of the John Templeton Foundation, said in a statement, "Alvin Plantinga recognized that not only did religious belief not conflict with serious philosophical work, but that it could make crucial contributions to addressing perennial problems in philosophy."

The Templeton Prize, worth about \$1.4 million, is one of the world's largest awarded to an individual and "honors a living person who has made an exceptional contribution to affirming life's spiritual dimension, whether through insight, discovery, or practical works." Previous winners have included Mother Teresa and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Plantinga, a member of the Christian Reformed Church, taught at the University of Notre Dame for 18 years until retiring in 2010.

His landmark 1974 book *God, Freedom, and Evil* is now "almost universally recognized as having laid to rest the logical problem of evil against theism," the foundation noted, by arguing that "in a world with free creatures, God cannot determine their behavior, so even an omnipotent God might not be able to create a world where all creatures will always freely choose to do good."

Plantinga said in a statement, "I hope the news of the prize will encourage young philosophers, especially those who bring Christian and theistic perspectives to bear on their work, towards greater creativity, integrity, and boldness." —Chris Herlinger, Religion News Service



EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES PHOTO BY BILL VONINGHOFF



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BUTTRICK FAMILY



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TEMPLETON PRIZE / JOHN HARRISON

LIVING The Word

June 11, Trinity Sunday

28:16-20

THE LECTORY isn't exactly subtle this week. It's Trinity Sunday, so we read two of the most obvious articulations of triune identity in all of scripture—the Great Commission and the Pauline benediction. At churches that also dramatically proliferate the word *trinity* in song, prayer, and sermon, Trinity Sunday begins to feel like it is trying too hard. (Remember: simply repeating a word a lot doesn't make it matter more or mean more.) Far better to arrive at Trinity Sunday having sung, prayed, and preached during Christmas-Epiphany and Easter-Pentecost in ways that articulate triune identity, inescapable and profound.

Moreover, these readings should remind us that we've already been consistently naming the triune God in our worship. Most church traditions make disciples according to Matthew's dominical rubric, baptizing "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And many churches make at least occasional use of Paul's benediction, whether as a greeting at the beginning of worship or as a blessing at the end.

These practices raise the question of whether trinity is presupposition or conclusion, beginning or ending, greeting or benediction, gathering or sending. In this week's readings, ending and sending are more overt. Paul ends his epistle with a trinitarian farewell; Jesus sends the nascent church on a trinitarian mission. Even the creation story is about God finishing the work and inviting humans to complete the task of filling the earth.

Yet each lesson also begins with gatherings and greetings. In Matthew, the risen Lord brings disciples together, drawing them *to* the mountain but *into* his authority. Paul's aim is to gather fractious Corinthians into order, agreement, and peace, and he commands greeting by kissing—a sharing of the same holy breath who easterled God's son. And Genesis begins by gathering inchoate void into ordered goodness; creation *ex nihilo* is God greeting nothingness with the invitation to be, to become, and to be blessed.

Taken together, the readings show how God's love evokes a pattern of going forth and coming together (classically designated *exitus* and *reditus*), of commission and communion. Trinity names that story of the effulgent One from whom we come and the holy mystery to whom we go. Trinity tells who truly authors our story—and the world's.

In other words, we need trinity as a conceptual grammar to tell adequately and faithfully the story of God creating and redeeming the world. This means, homiletically, that Genesis 1 and Matthew 28 are storied moments crying out for trinitarian retellings. Because Paul's benediction is less overtly a trinitarian

an narrative, because it appears static rather than storied, let's look more closely at this reading.

First of all, the three persons are connected here with coordinating conjunctions (Christ and God and Spirit) rather than prepositions (from the Father, through the Son, by or in the Spirit). So this trinitarian sighting might look more like a posed portrait than an action shot, more ontological than narrative. The traditional trinitarian prepositions orient us to divine agency, parsing the story's indivisible divine as the working of three nonconfusable divine persons. Coordinating conjunctions, on the other hand, emphasize equality of status, as Basil of Caesarea famously argued.

Yet the "ands" in the epistle reading also point to action: they explicate the full identity of who it is that enacts Paul's gospel story. Whenever Paul narrates the activity of Christ *or* God *or* the Holy Spirit, he presupposes that divine agency is most fully Christ *and* God *and* the Spirit.

Another reason Paul's benediction seems more static than storied: in the Greek, there's no verb. There are, however, three strong theological nouns—grace, love, and *koinōnia*—each of which gestures to what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do. The Lord Jesus Christ is *gracing*; God is *loving*, and the Holy Spirit is . . . what exactly? *Koinōnia* is harder to turn into a verb. The noun itself is variously translated as fellowship, communion, participation, even close relationship. Trying to determine what divine activity this noun implies, however, surfaces the reality that it takes two—or three—to *koinōnia*. Love and grace each require just one acting subject, but fellowshipping or communing is the work of a plural subject. I could never fellowship alone and neither could you (singular), but we can do so as we share together with the divine subject who actualizes our communion.

Paul's benediction, therefore, articulates the one narrative grammar of two divine stories. First is the story of how from all eternity the Father's outpoured love elicits the Son's gracious return in the communion of the Holy Spirit. The Holy One's own eternal life is ceaseless loving, gracing, and communing. Second, that same grammar holds in time: the scriptural story stretching from Eden to eschaton is one story of God's love and Christ's grace and the Spirit's *koinōnia*, these three who are one. The Holy One's temporal way with Israel and the church, indeed with all creation, is faithful loving, gracing, communing.

We can believe this, finally, because we are right there in the benediction, in the final phrase "with you all." Although no Greek verb connects Paul's triune blessing with us, most translations supply the word "be." In fact, the nouns have already narrated the connection. The triune One who ceaselessly loves, graces, and communes from all eternity has elected to faithfully love, grace, and commune with us all—not just at the beginning or end of our story, but now and forever, world without end.

Reflections on the lectionary

June 18, 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

9:35-10:30

THIS WEEK'S READINGS are bound together by the theme of journey. Exodus is explicit: "They had journeyed ... entered ... and camped." So is Matthew: Jesus "went about all the cities and villages"; later he "sent out" the Twelve. Psalm 100 exhorts us to "come into his presence" and "enter his gates ... and his courts." Romans, on the other hand, sounds immobile when it emphasizes "this grace in which we stand." But Paul immediately takes us on a journey from suffering through endurance and then character, all the way to hope.

This week's journey is not a journey away from divine identity, however, as if Trinity Sunday were clearly fixed in our rearview mirror. For Paul the terminus of the journey is hope precisely because "God's love has been poured ... through the Holy Spirit ... [because] Christ died." (Alliterate this doctrinally as God's agape, Christ's atonement, and the Spirit's actualization.) For Matthew, the apostolic mission will provoke controversy because of Jesus, culminating in "the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Exodus is explicitly a journey to the Lord, who self-identifies as the One who "bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." And the psalm draws worshipers into the presence of the Lord, who is loving, faithful, and good.

That our journey ends in God is a point worth emphasizing in a culture filled with apps for traveling to self-chosen destinations. God has chosen not only to go with us, bearing us along, but also to be our very goal. Consider how this final verse in Exodus could be described as Israel's handing an open itinerary ticket over to God. Given the mobility of this God, when the people say, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do," they are pledging to have no other destinations than God.

After all, this passage comes right before the Decalogue. Christians interpret the Ten Commandments as beginning with a preamble about Israel's journey "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). And because this phrasing looks back to the place departed from (Egypt) and the condition left behind (slavery), this journey into God is easily misinterpreted as merely freedom *from* rather than freedom *for*.

But the first claim of the Decalogue is far more than a rehearsal of the point of departure; it clearly articulates the destination at which Israel has arrived: "I am the Lord your God" (20:2). This claim, which in Judaism is counted as the first of the Ten Commandments ("no other gods" is the second), is always the goal, as well as the ground, of life with this delivering and summoning Lord. So every do or don't that follows is simultaneously about traveling with and arriving at God. In

other words, what Israel agrees in advance to obey (in this week's reading) is simply ten ways of describing the contours and destination of the same journey.

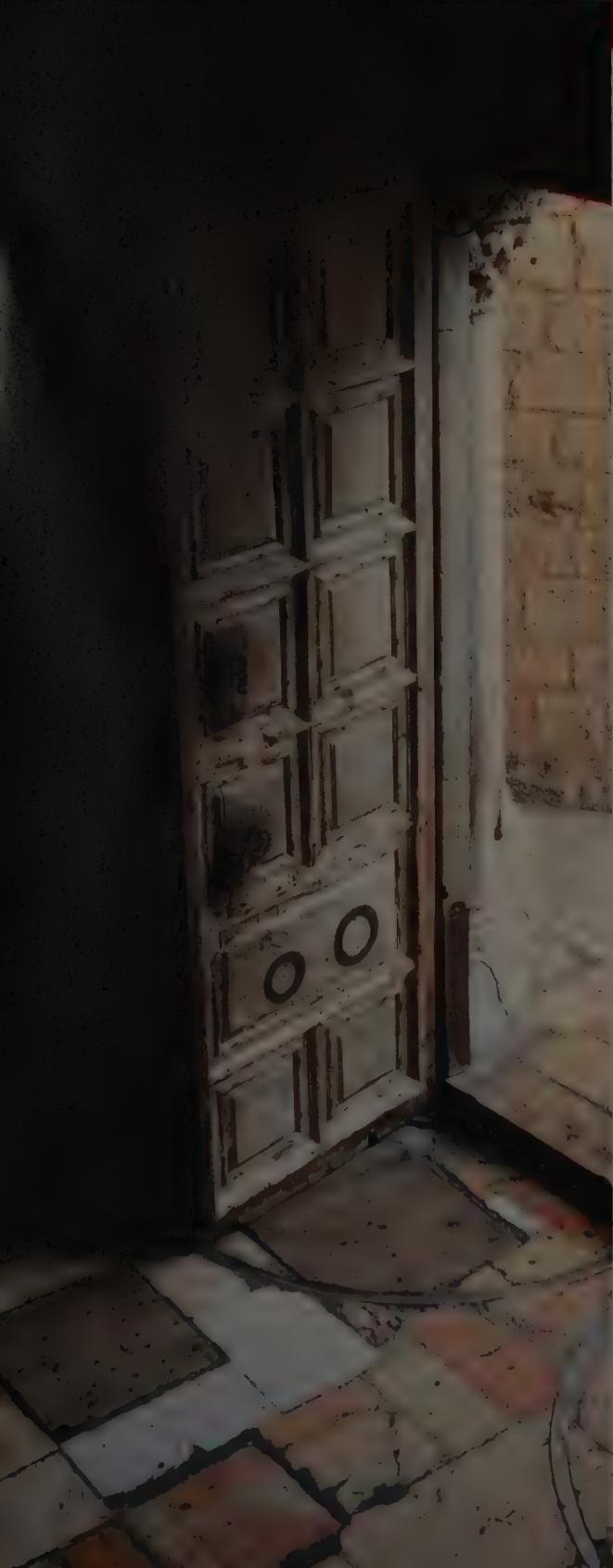
In related ways, both Exodus and Matthew invite reflection on the identity and shape of the people of God. In both stories, Israel is clearly different from other peoples and nations. Although narratively speaking Israel's exodus was from bondage in Egypt, conceptually Israel made an exodus "out of all the peoples." Israel left behind existing social and political formations in order to be identified as belonging particularly to this Lord—that is, to this commanding voice and this electing covenant. Likewise in Matthew, Jesus has summoned 12 disciples/apostles (compare 10:1 to 10:2) to focus and extend his ministry of compassion throughout "the towns of Israel," with a clear directive to avoid the towns of gentiles and Samaritans.

So in both testaments the politics of election might seem exclusionary, even nationalistic. It isn't, of course; last week's Gospel reading makes it clear that this is finally a story of good news for all nations (Matthew 28:19: consider the explicit expansion of authority from Israel [10:1] to "all authority in heaven and on earth" [28:18].) So, too, when the Lord's "treasured possession" is called to the vocation of "priestly kingdom," we hear echoes of a prior promise: to make of Abraham a great nation through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). The elect are chosen to receive blessing—and extend it.

In *Does God Need the Church?* Gerhard Lohfink summarizes this election dynamic and adds a dimension: "Being chosen is not a privilege or a preference *over others*, but existence *for others*, and hence the heaviest burden in history." While Lohfink rightly directs this claim about election toward Israel at the foot of Sinai, it would appear to fit our Gospel story, too. Being sent as laborers in the harvest begins with a bestowal of power on the Twelve, but that power is not for themselves but for others—for the "harassed and helpless" crowds on whom Jesus has compassion. So election plays out as the disarmed life of vulnerability and self-giving that risks being rejected, persecuted, arrested, and betrayed—indeed betrayed to death.

It's not a stretch to find here the same cruciform pattern Paul hymns in Philippians 2, where divine power walks a path of service, suffering, and death. We share that path because we have been elected into this priestly kingdom, baptized into this apostolic calling. Can we walk the path with gladness and singing? Only if the Spirit of God sings through us; only if Paul is right that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."

The author is D. Brent Laytham, professor of theology and dean of the Ecumenical Institute at St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore.



IS THERE A BENEDICT OPTION FOR LIBERALS?

Deep roots, open doors

by Steve Thorngate

ROD DREHER'S *The Benedict Option*

touches on an array of subjects, from the decline of the Christian West to the atomizing effects of smartphones to the competing rights claims of same-sex couples and evangelical bakers. It does this in tones pitched variously to inform, to motivate, or to air grievance. So there is ample opportunity for readers to be distracted from Dreher's overall purposes, as indeed many have been—interpreting *The Benedict Option* as either a political tract against same-sex marriage or a separatist call to take to the hills. Both readings are there for the proof-texter's picking; neither attends to the deeper vision of this provocative book.

To do that, you have to appreciate who the book is for. It is not aimed at conservative political activists, though its publisher is known for just that. It doesn't target radicals who aspire to rarified modes of Christian community, though Dreher finds much to admire there. Nor is it meant to enlighten spiritual seekers or the social scientists who study them.

No, Dreher writes for the church and the ordinary Christians in it. He sees existential threats to the faith—from without but especially from within, where bonds are frayed and formation is thin. Inspired by the well-known ending of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, Dreher looks to St. Benedict for a survival plan. How can the church build the internal strength it needs?

The need for thick, Christian ways of life is a familiar idea for mainline Protestants.

To be sure, the problem Dreher is addressing isn't just pews that are vacant three Sundays a month and halfheartedly occupied the fourth. It's the broader cultural context: the West's sacral imagination long since displaced by nominalism, the triumph of individual desire as an ethic, the loosening of communal ties of all kinds, the way moral therapeutic deism functions as priest to all this and rarely prophet. Dreher, a self-described pessimist, presents a case that church and culture have colluded in their own mutual, steady decline.

Yet his solution isn't about saving the world. It's about rebuilding the church, for its own sake first and then for the sake of the world. It's about creating thick, resilient Christian communities, as Benedict did, that will serve the world by their very existence—by the way they form their members as Christians and as humans.

This requires deeper roots in everything that makes Christianity distinct. Dreher calls for a recovery of sacramental worship in all its strangeness, over and against the instinct to meet culture where it's at. Christians have a unique story, and they need to learn to tell it—first of all to themselves. Above all they need to be faithful disciples, before being patriotic Americans or tolerant global citizens or anything else.

This means—to take one example—refusing to bow to the gods of technological progress. Dreher critiques the dominant instrumentalist view that technology is morally neutral, a mere tool to use for good or ill. No, he says, technology trains us to believe that “if we can do it, we must be free to do it.” This is an important insight. The deep libertarianism of Silicon Valley is not a coincidence; it's a worldview shaped by tech itself and promulgated by a business elite whose products have colonized our lives. It's become clear that our gadgets give us ever more freedom to do anything our socially isolated little hearts desire—except stop using them. To Dreher, the ascendance of this techno-worldview is an indictment of liberalism and a poison for the church.

Dreher emphasizes, however, that the Benedict Option is not just about rejecting the bad, technological or otherwise. It's

about cultivating the good; it's resistance by way of creation. Dreher is at his best when he is constructive and concrete, and his chapter explicating Benedict's Rule for 21st-century laypeople is perhaps his most compelling. Cultivating the good means seeing God's presence in the everyday, in mundane routine. Anxious people are “looking for that ‘killer app’ that will make everything right again”; Benedictine life shows another way. Develop a discipline of prayer. Let your approach to work flow out of that prayer. Grow roots in a place, among a people. Go to church, and linger afterward—be a pilgrim, not a tourist.

Our lives are inevitably centered on something, says Dreher, and it requires daily practice to ensure that something is Christ. So the most pressing task for Christians is to embed themselves in the day-to-day life of Christian community. And wherever thick Christian ways of life do not exist, they will simply have to be built, one local, unglamorous piece at a time.

This doesn't mean turning a blind eye to national politics, but it does mean giving it less relative emphasis. If the Benedict Option is a withdrawal strategy, it's one of priority, not principle. It's not that public life has no value, only that time is limited and other things matter more: Christian culture and community, a faithful alternative to the reigning order.

This will all sound quite familiar to most mainline Protestant church leaders, and quite compelling to a lot of them. Dreher's themes echo the postliberal theology popularized by, among others, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon. Their thinking has met some resistance in the mainline, but it has also deeply shaped it—especially the distrust many of us have for the imperial state, our refusal to cede the high christological ground to evangelicals, and our localist-communitarian ideals. (The *CENTURY*'s inbox of article submissions contains enough quotes from Wendell Berry for us editors to joke about imposing a moratorium.)

Meanwhile, the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council have deeply influenced worship renewal among liberal Protestants. While traditionalist Catholics don't tend to see the council's reforms in a positive light, it's easy for them to miss the fact that on the Protestant side, the broad postconciliar trajectory has been toward tradition at least as much as away from it. Liberal churches aren't just singing social justice songs about a gender-neutral God. Many are recentering their worship life around weekly communion; some are also recovering the Easter vigil and other baptismal festivals, maybe even the catechumenate. Churches are looking to tradition as they work to form thicker, more deeply sacramental worshiping communities.

These decades-long trends haven't captured the entire mainline. But nor are they mere footnotes. So as a mainline Protestant it's a bit jarring to read Dreher, practically taste his enthusiasm for Christian community and liturgy, and yet recognize that there's at least one more group he isn't writing for: us.

The Benedict Option is aimed at conservative Christians, not Christians generally. While the rest of us may find a lot to like here, the feeling doesn't seem to be mutual. Dreher—who as a Methodist turned Catholic turned Orthodox is a rather self-conscious ecumenist—claims early on that the Benedict Option

is accessible to “all churches and confessions.” But elsewhere he’s pretty clear that he doesn’t really mean all of them. He means the ones he deems correct.

Dreher spells out a more or less linear path of corruption, an orthodox faith accommodating itself to secular modernity. In this telling, the more liberal churches appear only as a cautionary tale, a glimpse of the fate that lies around the bend. Dreher, of course, departs from many religious conservatives in acknowledging that cultural accommodation is a problem on that side of the church aisle at all. But his narrative leaves little space to consider whether the problem might look qualitatively different in a liberal context rather than simply worse.

This kind of linear thinking pervades *The Benedict Option*. Dreher does acknowledge that modernity brought some good with the bad, and he explicitly disavows any longing to turn back the clock. But disclaimers aside, he persistently views the church and the culture through a lens of linear decline. Communitarianism is displaced by rank individualism; traditional restraints steadily crumble until nothing remains and anything goes.

The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation
By Rod Dreher
Sentinel (Penguin),
272 pp., \$14.98



At our best, more progressive Christians don’t take the inverse view of this classic traditionalist one. Instead, we recognize that the whole framework is too tidy. After all, tradition and progress are both good things—and sometimes oppressively bad ones. Community matters more than just about anything—except maybe human dignity, which can flourish in community but can also be undermined by it. Life together can indeed help us smash late modernity’s idol of individual desire. But what about community’s tendency to nurture the desire to stamp out difference?

In short, what’s at stake here is not simply a choice between cultural accommodation and Dreher’s call to “form a vibrant counterculture.” There is also the question of discernment. Christians do have a norm that is far higher than any whim of culture or politics or techno-futurist progress. But that norm isn’t tradition; it’s the gospel. And while faithfulness to this gospel will surely put us at odds with contemporary culture, it will also put us at odds with our own Christian past. The hard part is knowing when.

To a traditionalist like Dreher, this sort of appeal to discernment might look like a smokescreen for doctrinal anarchy. It isn’t. It’s an effort to take seriously the Holy Spirit’s work forming community from the bottom up, in particular places at particular times. A community that discerns that Spirit together won’t mirror the wider culture’s values, but neither will it replicate the values of the old power structures. It will be a people both peculiar and perpetually made new.

Unfortunately, the notion that a church’s more liberal values might come from a theologically constructive place, as opposed to a culturally accommodated one, lies outside Dreher’s grand linear narrative. This comes up most concretely in his section on same-sex marriage. Dreher sees same-sex marriage as one of many stops on the sexual revolution train, part of a cultural sea change that has reinvented the fundamental purpose of sex. In opposing it, he appeals to scripture, natural law, and the weight of tradition. He commends those gay and lesbian Christians who eschew marriage and embrace celibacy instead.

For Dreher, same-sex marriage is more symptom than cause; opposing it is not the Benedict Option’s purpose. But it is most certainly a litmus test. Holding the line on marriage represents a “core teaching of the Christian faith,” Dreher says, and there is “perhaps none more important to obey.” (Really? None?) Dreher calls the Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision a Waterloo for religious conservatives: the sexual revolution won.

Yet his underlying theological points say more about why marriage is good than why it should only be for straight people. The incarnation, says Dreher, means that the way we treat our bodies profoundly matters. Yes, 100 times! But is there no

You can't go back

“You can’t go back,” my mother always said.
But human nature does the opposite.
(Of course, this happens, but inside your head.)

Unspill your coffee? Leave your words unsaid?
The jeans from years ago will suddenly fit!
“You can’t go back,” my mother always said,

And she was right. The dead are not undead,
And traumas still will need a tourniquet.
(Of course, this happens, but inside your head.)

You want your moments cut and edited.
You want the bliss, and not the deep regret.
“You can’t go back,” my mother always said.

The trick is to remember what you had
And simultaneously forgive, forget.
(Of course, this happens, but inside your head.)

It is never quite in balance, this method
Of loving who you were, and you aren’t yet.
“You can’t go back,” my mother always said.
(Of course, this happens, but inside your head.)

Kim Bridgford

daylight between something mattering and its mattering in exactly the way we've perceived it to matter before? Citing Olivier Clément, Dreher claims that in Christianity, eros is transformed into agape. Eugene Rogers has said the same in the *CENTURY* ("Same-sex complementarity," May 11, 2011). I wonder what Dreher would make of something else Rogers says: that marriage is for sanctification, and same-sex couples need to be made holy, too.

Dreher can't imagine that liberal stances might arise from theological discernment.

Probably he'd make nothing of it—Dreher shows little interest in theological accounts of same-sex marriage as actually practiced by real-life Christians. The topic functions instead as a proxy for the larger cultural tsunami he sees crashing into a church with no levees. Fine. But he's wrong to write off all Christian embraces of same-sex marriage as cultural accommodation "for the sake of keeping Millennials." Same-sex couples and their allies are not some demographic group that a separately defined group of church leaders needs to make decisions for and about. They're among us; they are us.

And together, we seek to discern the gospel's demands and the Spirit's movement. There is deep conviction here, and serious theological work being done.

Perhaps someone else will need to articulate a progressive Benedict Option, a separate project parallel to Dreher's. Richard Beck has developed some thoughts on this on his Experimental Theology blog. Beck's main point is that while Dreher emphasizes Christian culture—*institutions, orthodoxy, piety, liturgy*—progressive Christians should instead prioritize cruciformity: formation in the cross for the care of others. "Rod's BenOp is inspired by medieval monasticism," he writes, "where the BenOp I'm describing is inspired by the gospels."

As Beck acknowledges, the two are hardly mutually exclusive. Conservative Christians can and do devote themselves to self-giving service, though this isn't Dreher's focus. I'd add that liberals can be and are formed for Christian communities in which tradition speaks but doesn't hog the mic, in which theology and piety aren't preserved in amber yet do matter, deeply.

So while I'd be glad to see Dreher's Benedict Option thrive among conservatives, and even gladder to see a liberal option to the Option thrive alongside it, I still hope for something even more outrageous: that we may all somehow be one. As long as we're hoping, let's hope for a rebirth of thick Christian community that is broadly, generously ecumenical, that plants its deepest roots neither in received tradition nor in dreams of progress but in the gospel of the living God. cc

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My faith and my discomfort with it

How to be an American Muslim

by Haroon Moghul

WHEN OUR FLIGHT LANDED in Tel Aviv, all the passengers were to deplane onto a waiting bus to be ferried across the tarmac to the terminal. All the passengers but four, that is. Three Palestinians and myself, an honorary Palestinian, were taken for further questioning. In the time we had together, we shared names and traded bios. Like me, they were students—studying in Egypt. Unlike me, they called this place home. Unlike me, they had a harder time getting in. For I was Muslim but also—and this confounded one Israeli soldier after another—American.

Before even reaching passport control, I was interrogated by two women who were very interested in determining if I was callous or dangerous. These were the facts they had to play with: I'd turned 21 a month before. I was single. I'd arrived via Cairo, where I'd already been studying for a month, and after this trip I'd go back for another month. I was studying Arabic. I was of Pakistani descent and roomed, in Cairo, with Haris, an Indian Muslim raised in Saudi Arabia, who was at NYU on a student visa. This most interested them, not just in Tel Aviv, but back in Egypt where the flight originated. Before I had even made it to the ticket counter, two men and a woman pulled me aside for questioning, which began and ended with my naming my friends. Sorry, Bradley, Jeremy, Jacob, and James. I needed white names.

Several hours later I was judged nonthreatening enough to enter. The Lonely Planet guide to Israel hadn't bothered to include a section for traveling while indigenous or sharing the religion of the indigenous.

A shared taxi drove several of us 45 minutes across a gorgeous landscape to Jerusalem. I had never been to a place that made me feel more preternaturally uncomfortable. Many inhabitants were refugees who'd found a safe haven at the cost of expelling or suppressing that haven's native population, a desperate conflict that any reasonable person would have seen coming from a century ago. Security delays had almost cost me my goal: a visit to the Old City, where I'd join Friday prayer services at the Noble Sanctuary—you might know it as the Temple Mount—which includes the Farthest Mosque, al-Aqsa, and the Dome of the Rock. When I finally arrived at the sanctuary, there must have been several hundred thousand people there.

In 619, at the lowest point in his mission, Muhammad was carried overnight from Mecca to Jerusalem. At the far edge of the Noble Sanctuary, Muhammad led every one of the

prophets in prayer—one of the most powerful images of Muslim universalism, because prophets were sent to all peoples. Muhammad also came to the large rock, now covered over by one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, and from there he ascended into heaven.

Muhammad approached God's throne, and in the intimacy of the Divine audience, he was informed that Muslims should perform *salat* (ritual prayer) 50 times a day. On his return, Muhammad shared word of the assignment with Moses, who urged Muhammad to talk God down to a more reasonable number. Moses and God went back and forth until five prayers were agreed on. Moses insisted that even this was overly much, but Muhammad couldn't bring himself to return for another reduction. (I'm with Moses on this one.)

Every time we Muslims pray, something of Jerusalem stirs within our hearts.

Every time Muslims pray, something of Jerusalem stirs within our hearts. It was from Jerusalem that Muhammad went up to God, after all, not Mecca or Medina. And each prostration—when the Muslim touches her forehead to the floor—is deemed a reproduction of Muhammad's ascent, the closest she can get to God. The favored way of beseeching him, it represents the humbling of the self, but also Islam's refusal to surrender external form from internal condition. You can understand the deep desire to be there.

I had made it in time to join Friday prayers. Mind you, most young men—my age, for example—weren't permitted in, and almost every time I returned there during that trip, I had to argue my way in. But what I found behind checkpoints and past interrogations made it nearly impossible to leave.

Many places matter. Rarer is that place that feels deeply, truly holy. In the face of immense limitations on their free-

Haroon Moghul is a senior fellow and director of development at the Center for Global Policy and a leader of the Muslim Leadership Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book *How to Be a Muslim: An American Story* (Beacon Press). Reprinted with permission from Beacon Press.

doms, Palestinians had created here a religiosity that breathed through ancient stones. It felt like God was here, in a way I've rarely felt God. Was it in spite of the tragedy of Palestine, or because of it? It was a summer of intifada. And yet no Palestinian store owner or restaurateur or taxi driver ever took my money. "You are a guest in our home." Their home. Where they were prisoners or refugees or second-class citizens.

There are many places where Muslims oppress other Muslims. Consider the history of the Kurds, as one example. Some governments do not allow their citizens to freely assemble, speak their minds, or even move about the country. Saudi Arabia, astonishingly, will not let women drive. Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, was his employer. A later wife commanded an army in battle, and yet a restriction on women motoring is declared Islamic.

There are also many places where Muslims oppress people of other faiths. But these are harder for many Muslims to confront, because they involve a kind of self-critique that no people find easy to pursue. It's the same reason many Americans might get whipped up into outrage over something occurring in Saudi Arabia, neglecting the fact that we have funded and armed and defended no other Muslim regime so strongly. Complicity has a funny effect on morality. But that doesn't mean the Palestinians haven't been wronged. The difference is how it's played out.

Uighurs are persecuted by China, Chechens brutalized by Russia, and Kashmiris occupied by India, though none of these registers in quite the same way. Partly it's religious—Srinagar is not in the Qur'an, nor is Ürümqi a sacred city. Partly it has to do with the outsized attention Israel receives in American media, and the country's claims to sharing our values—if, of course, by "our values" you mean values we've tried very hard to abandon. It is also the lopsidedness of the conflict, which is frequently reported entirely backward in much of American media. However, it's not only that. Who, really, is surprised by the crushing underfoot of small minorities by vastly larger states? What chance did Crimea's Tatars have against Stalin, or the Rohingya on the fringes of Myanmar?

What boggles the Muslim mind—what represents to it, again and again, how far Muslim civilization has fallen—is the fact that a tiny state can occupy some of its holiest places and no productive action can be taken. That tempts some Muslims to ugly anti-Semitism—Israel must have far more power than we can see!—and others to impotent fury and rage. If Palestine is occupied, what does that say about those who seem to be able to summon nothing but indignation? What is it about modern Muslims that made us so unable to live up to our ancestors' achievements, or our contemporaries of other backgrounds? To be Muslim is to be the stunted descendant of giants, to live in the ruin of your own civilization.

Seeing young men slammed to the ground for not answer-

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ing a question quickly enough, a family uprooted from its home to make room for someone from somewhere else entirely, prompts a young man to ask why even if there may be tens of millions more like him, collectively they could do nothing. It is a question many Muslims feel, though they may be afraid to voice it, for fear of blasphemy: If Islam is so great, why are Muslims doing so badly? Maybe that's why so many Islamic extremists find it so easy to kill fellow Muslims.

Yet to feel more keenly my own impotence was not among my reasons for going to Jerusalem. In fact, Jerusalem just amplified what I'd been feeling in Egypt ever since arriving there. In Cairo, I could construct no consistent spiritual practice, not even when surrounded by mosques and muezzins. But why? I wasn't lazy. I was an active writer, a good student; I took part in student life, maybe more than I should've, and otherwise kept myself busy. When my anxiety ebbed, I'd work out; I read books religiously and watched movies superstitiously. Religion was the one part of my life where all discipline disappeared.

Egypt was a deep disappointment: a country with so much potential, not just stuck, but sliding backward. But who was I to have thought I could fix Muslims, or repair Islam, when I could not even overhaul myself? I wasn't going to save the Muslim world through my pathetic efforts at NYU. I was the Muslim world. Afraid. Frozen. I could not move forward. I was not even inside of me. So many Muslims, it hit me, and yet so little changed. Whoever said there is strength in numbers hadn't met modern Islam. We were an inversely proportional civilization. When we were few, we were bold. Now that we were many, we were all but moribund.

After a time

After a time of writing
I stop to let my mind breathe.
This is necessary, otherwise
the thoughts turn gray and
drift.

Even God had to rest
after creating.

Sometimes I go to the hushed
margins of the woods
where the afternoon light is
distilled in mist.

Where it is so quiet I can hear
drips falling on the hands
of the vine maples.

In the spaces between the drops
I wait listening.

Luci Shaw

The only way I could think of making sense of this was by writing. I would write a novel. And I did. One of my characters, an adherent of a suspicious Sufi order that espoused outrageous beliefs about the end times, lit himself on fire before a McDonald's on the Avenue of the League of Arab States, launching a popular revolution across the Near East, democracy, Islamist power, then disaster. The point was to tell a story about a time after people have had too much. The status quo was unsustainable. But what would follow? All that frustration had to go somewhere; it'd be directed out as much as in.

Who was I to repair Islam when I could not even overhaul myself?

Suicide as regicide, down with the dictator and down with the people who let themselves be dictated to. Implosion and explosion, an energy radiating outward in devastating human waves, smashing apart what was outside while it broke apart what was inside. And yet I did not think these suicides were faithless. They were acts of devotion to God, sins that produced saints. If there is any consolation, my novel foreshadowed the Arab Spring, including the arrival of political Islam into power and the violence thereafter.

But writing about suicide? I conceived of these self-immolations as nakedly Abrahamic. In the Muslim tradition, the young Abraham, not yet a prophet, smashes his people's idols to reveal their inconstancy and harmlessness. Unimpressed by this argument for radical monotheism, his people cast him into a bonfire, but God intervenes to seal Abraham off from the heat. He was in the fire, but not on fire.

I wanted to bring this tradition to my time. What would it mean to cut the idol down, when the idol is now the self, man who has deified himself into the measure of all things? Would there be a self after, or would nothing remain because there was nothing there all along? But to kill oneself thusly, no matter how reverently, would still be sinful—it would demand the same bonfire Abraham landed in. There comes a point when sin can only lead to sin, and faith as well to sin. Was the course of the modern world simply incompatible with Islam, whose time had passed? Such a time would have to come to pass. Every great idea fades.

I could not otherwise explain why the Muslim world performed so poorly, or Islam affected me so unevenly. The two were one in my mind. I should have been able to force myself to wake up to pray the *fajr*. I did not know why I could not compel myself to pray five times a day when I was in a place overflowing with mosques, with minaret alarm clocks ready to remind me in case I had forgotten. I didn't know why I would rather be flirting with a restaurant waitress than in the mosque studying the life of the Prophet. I should have simply been able to become Muslim. I should have pushed myself into obedience and, once there, settled down. And if I could not so reinvent

myself, then what did that suggest about me? Light a fire and throw myself in. Die before dying, as the Sufi poets would say. If God willed, you'd live.

Haris and I reconnected as soon as we had set ourselves up back in Manhattan. He was downtown, but I was on the Upper East Side, in my first private apartment, shared with two friends.

When I got out of the subway one Tuesday, folks were congregating in the street, right off the curb, looking against traffic, their necks tilted at 45-degree angles. No one spoke. Until spoken to. A plane, someone told me, had flown into a World Trade tower. I assumed he meant a private plane. A terrible, horrible, but fully accidental accident. Thinking no more of it, I went to class—and found out, minutes later, just what had happened. Our professor, who'd suffered the shah's authoritarianism and then Khomeini's, let everyone except the Muslims and Middle Easterners leave. He shook his head. He was afraid. Not just because our nation had been attacked. But by whom. Be careful as you make plans to find your way home, travel in groups, accept that it would never be September 10 again.

On the way up the stairs and out of the building, I asked a friend if she needed help getting home. She hesitated, then looked me up and down and said, "Nobody knows I'm Muslim." I was brown, bearded, and president of the Islamic Center at NYU, whose community was one of the biggest in proximity to a mass murder that'd be claimed in our name. She left, the pro-

fessor began smoking on the sidewalk, and we all trembled as we stared up at the smoke that had devoured that perfect blue sky.

Where there were once two towers, now there were none. Then there were police cars—endless sirens. The city was on lockdown. Frightened and confused students filled Washington Square Park, classes ended, but the trains stopped, cell phone service was down, every television endlessly replaying a moment of catastrophe. We heard that Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Denver, and Seattle had also been attacked by jetliners. Car bombs had gone off in the nation's capital. I knew, instantly, that this could only be al-Qaeda's doing.

I rushed to our temporary prayer space, inside NYU's Catholic Center, expecting to find Muslims, but instead we found an orthodox Jew. "What are you doing here?" I asked. We knew each other, but, as I wanted to subtly communicate, on this day he would probably *not* want to be found in a mosque.

"I figured if someone needed to get home, and wanted someone to walk her, I could come along. A hijab might provoke rage right now. Alongside a Jewish man, perhaps less so." On that day of all days, he thought of us.

Before, the gaze of an omniscient God compelled me. Thereafter, the omnipresent eyes of a surveillance state would not leave me be. There would be nowhere we could go where we would not be asked to apologize. Many like me would come to regret wasting the time when we could have chosen to be different people. But those days were gone, never to come back. 

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Kierkegaard's gifts to the church

An authentic life

by Elizabeth Palmer

I'VE WAITED my whole life for this book. And so has the church." So claims Richard Beck in endorsing Stephen Backhouse's biography of Søren Kierkegaard. Although blurbs are often prone to exaggeration, Beck's claim is not an overstatement. The church *has* been waiting for this book. Other excellent biographies of the Danish theologian have been written, but none is as accessible as this one.

Backhouse, who teaches social and political theology at St. Mellitus College in London, succeeds because he makes a clear distinction between Kierkegaard's life and his ideas without divorcing the two. This distinction is mirrored in the structure of the book, which begins with biography (told in narrative form, at times in the present tense and with considerable poetic license) and ends with overviews of each of Kierkegaard's major works. Understanding Kierkegaard's ideas is impossible without knowing his biography, and Backhouse faithfully ties the two together.

At the heart of Backhouse's narrative is Kierkegaard's prolific use of pseudonyms, which has caused much consternation and misunderstanding. Kierkegaard used pseudonymous writing to lead readers toward the immediacy of a relationship with God, unburdened by concerns about the identity of the author of the book at hand. Ironically, the stubbornness with which Kierkegaard strove to deflect attention from himself has driven many readers into an obsessive investigation of the man as well as his beliefs. There's deep irony in the very idea of a biography of someone who continually (and sometimes painfully) worked to conceal himself. Near the end of his life, Backhouse notes, Kierkegaard "stipulated clearly that he was *not* a witness to the truth, he was *without authority*, and he was *not* claiming to say anything that the New Testament has not already made clear."

The man behind the carefully constructed personas was a Christian of deep faith. His later works, published under his own name, explicitly explore discipleship, scripture, practices of love, and faith lived out in community. In his final journal entry before his death, Kierkegaard wrote that God desires

a human being who in the last lap of this life, when God seemingly changes into sheer cruelty and with the most cruelly devised cruelty does everything to deprive him of all zest for life, nevertheless continues to believe that God is



Kierkegaard: A Single Life

By Stephen Backhouse
Zondervan, 304 pp., \$24.99

love, that God does it out of love. . . . He has no faith in himself, but he does have faith in God.

That description was personally borne out on the author's deathbed six weeks later. When asked by his friend Emil Boesen whether he believed and took refuge in Christ, the weakening 42-year-old replied with bemusement, "Yes, of course, what else?" Backhouse is not the first biographer to tell this story, but his account is the most engaging. He excels as a storyteller of theological drama.

Kierkegaard's impact has been extensive—across virtually all fields of theology and philosophy—and he has attracted a wide range of readers and commentators, from Franklin D. Roosevelt

The man behind the carefully constructed personas was a Christian of deep faith.

(who claimed Kierkegaard helped him understand the Nazis) to the popular Twitter profile KimKierkegaard. Yet the multiple voices in his own writing make him a difficult figure to pin down, and he is often taken up by people with very different agendas.

Kierkegaard was aware of this problem, and he worked in his own time to avoid being appropriated by either the conservative ruling party in Denmark or the populist national-liberal opposition. Backhouse writes:

Poets and playwrights admired the man who wrote provocative fiction. Philosophers read him for his statements on the nature of time, existence, and the meaning of life. Conservatives liked Søren for his opposition to democracy and revolution. Liberals liked Søren for his championing of the individual and the common man against the forces of inherited tradition. Atheists loved his attacks on the clergy and official religion of Christendom. Reformation, longing for a renewal of Christianity in the

land, also loyed his attacks on the clergy and official religion of Christendom.

If this is the book on Kierkegaard the church needs, a deeper question yet remains: Why does the church need any book on Kierkegaard? What does Kierkegaard offer to people of faith and the communities that support them?

Kierkegaard's first gift to the church is an acute psychological description of human existence and human limitations. His early writings abound with evocative images that speak to lives marred by brokenness or despair. His insights about faith—the cognitive and existential leaps required to grasp that God could love us and forgive even the worst of our sins, and the absurdity of aligning one's life with the often surprising call of God—are deeply challenging. But they are also sources of comfort for those who live with uncertainty or doctrinal doubts. There's something refreshingly honest, as well as terrifying, in Kierkegaard's claim that believing in God is like swimming over an abyss 70,000 fathoms deep. Reading Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works may not move most Christians to the point of experiencing God's grace, but they help us glimpse our desire to get there. It's when we see our sin and contingency that we can grasp who Christ really is for us.

In this respect, Kierkegaard is a particular gift to all who give and receive pastoral care. I remember answering my phone one evening and hearing the distressed voice of a parishioner whose life was unraveling because of addiction. Charles had lost his job and was being mandated to complete a course of professional treatment. He called to tell me that he had dropped out of the program. His unflinching acceptance of the consequences of his noncompliance simultaneously scared and comforted him. "I just don't think I've hit rock bottom yet," he lamented, "and until I do, I'm going to stay right where I am. I know that things are going to get worse for me, and I guess I'm OK with that."

Knowing that Charles was familiar with Kierkegaard, I asked him if he remembered Kierkegaard's contrast in *Fear and Trembling* between the "knight of resignation" and the "knight of faith." Both knights live and suffer within the reality of loss—but the knight of faith does so with hope in God, while the knight of resignation is unable to grasp that hope.

"Yes," Charles answered, and then there was a long pause. "Oh, I see the connection. I'm the knight of resignation. I'm willing to give up everything that's

good in my life without ever getting it back, and I don't have any hope that this will change." He continued tentatively: "But do you think it might someday change for me? Will I ever become the knight of faith? Do I need to hit rock bottom first?"

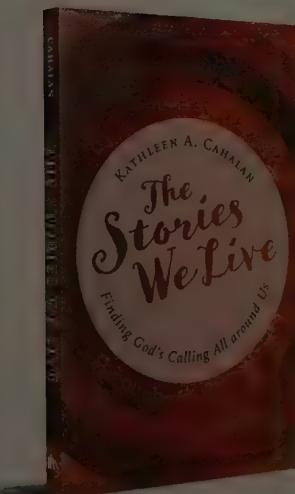
I told Charles that even though he may not be able to describe himself yet as a knight of faith, he was, like Abraham on Mount Moriah, already held by God. The fact that he wanted to become a knight of faith, someone who holds fast to the promise of God's mercy, meant that he wasn't entirely stuck in resignation.

The second gift Kierkegaard gives the church is the withering power of his attacks on the established church in Denmark, including its dominant theology, its institutional structure, and its pastors. This stance is the focus of Kierkegaard's polemical writings in which he became enmeshed during the last years of his life. He was offended by a theology that turned Christianity into a form of philosophical Hegelianism (Kierkegaard's charge against the popular professor H. L. Martensen), by culturally and politically sanctioned church leaders (embodied for Kierkegaard by Bishop J. P. Mynster), and by anti-institutional populist forms of religion that made an idol of the masses (Kierkegaard's view of

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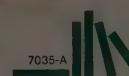
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the pastor-educator Nikolai F. S. Grundtvig). As Kierkegaard saw it, these manifestations of bourgeois faith lured Danes away from Jesus' radical call to discipleship. Caught up in the crowd of a culturally sanctioned faith, Christians were saved from the offensive but necessary movement of throwing themselves as sinners on God's mercy.

Although Christianity in 21st-century America is far from that of 19th-century Denmark, it is not only in Kierkegaard's day that pastors were guilty of preaching in a way that "tones down, veils, suppresses, omits some of what is most decisively Christian" (as Kierkegaard put it in an 1854 newspaper article following Mynster's death). Refusing on his deathbed to receive holy communion from a clergyman, Kierkegaard complained about a church that was beholden to the state, a church in which "the pastors are civil servants of the Crown." Today the co-opting of the church comes from other directions. Fear of numerical decline, nostalgia for the way things used to be, or adherence to a political agenda exerts its own pressure toward conformity and security.

And clergy are not the only ones Kierkegaard faults. Pews as well as pulpits are filled with religious complacency:

The New Testament is very easy to understand. But we human beings are really a bunch of scheming swindlers; we pretend to be unable to understand it because we understand very well that the minute we understand we are obliged to act accordingly at once. . . . I open the N.T. and read: "If you want to be perfect, then sell all your goods and give to the poor and come and follow me." Good God, all the capitalists, the officeholders, and the pensioners, the whole race no less, would be almost beggars.

Kierkegaard's third gift is the devotional writings published under his own name during the middle period of his authorship, including *Works of Love*, *For Self-Examination*, *Practice in Christianity*, and the many *Edifying* and *Upbuilding Discourses*. In these works, he abandons his angst-filled thought experiments to exhort Christians to develop robust practices of discipleship. The distinction between thought and action is, in fact, at the heart of Kierkegaard's multiple layers of authorship. There's a difference between *struggling existentially* with the big philosophical questions of faith (as the early pseudonymous works do) and *living in faith* (as the signed works instruct their readers to do).

Kierkegaard famously posited three distinct stages of human existence—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. As Backhouse explains, the aesthete "flits from one temporary experience to the next" while the ethical person "chooses to live according to a duty external to himself rather than according to some whim of self-satisfaction or human invention." The religious stage, however, is about "existing before God." The religious individual is "set apart from habitually following that which is universal to all, even when the universal is good. . . . A life chosen for God will be distinctly marked by the suffering that comes from being set apart."

Part of what makes a person religious is how he or she interprets this suffering. "Unlike the aesthete or the ethicist, the religious man knows misfortune happens to anyone and everyone and is not a source of grief. Truly religious grief is over guilt, not misfortune." In response to this grief, however, the Christian shouldn't turn inward and huddle in existential mis-

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ery before God. Glimpsing the possibility of redemption—of God's love that bridges the seemingly impossible gap between humans and God—the Christian is then free to engage in works of love in the world.

Ultimately, for Kierkegaard, Christ was not a philosophical paradox but a pattern, a prototype of faithful living. Having grasped the paradox of the incarnation and grieved over the intractability of human sinfulness, the faithful reader of Kierkegaard is called toward a relationship with God and the world that is modeled on Christ's suffering and sacrifice. This is what it means to love.

Kierkegaard's later emphasis on works of love over anxiety doesn't negate the significance of his early writing. Grappling with the paradoxes of Christian faith doesn't go away in the life of faith. But Kierkegaard's later work is perhaps more relevant for today's Christians, who are less likely to stay awake at night worrying about their existential status before God than to wonder what it means to do works of love for the neighbor in need. Lived faith can transform individuals and communities. Even if the reader of Kierkegaard remains suspended above the abyss, forever hoping against hope to glimpse God's grace, she or he may do so while also actively living into God's justice.

Backhouse warns in the preface against treating Kierkegaard merely as an object of philosophical or theological study and thereby avoiding the challenge Kierkegaard presents to each individual in his or her singularity and inwardness—what Kierkegaard referred to as “the Single One.” “If you use these overviews to avoid engaging with the real thing, then it may be small comfort to know the only person Kierkegaard dislikes more than you is me. . . . You must read the originals and decide for yourself. . . . Kierkegaard's thoughts need to be encountered, one by one, person by person, or they are not encountered at all.” He continues:

The infinite, eternal God is standing before you now with greasy hair and a bit of fish in his beard, bidding you who are weary to come to him and he will give you rest. To turn away in offense from this person is natural, expected, even reasonable. Yet to turn towards such a one is to turn away from all that has a false claim on your identity and into the one who defines

what it is to exist. . . . As long as people continue to live and move and have their being in habitual ideas of their own creation, Kierkegaard will continue to buildup and provoke wherever he is encountered by the Single One.

By looking at the life and writings of a single individual, readers—both of this biography and of Kierkegaard's own writings—might find their own singularity and be moved toward authentic life with Christ, a life that transforms angst into action and despair into discipleship. Kierkegaard would expect nothing less of us.

CC

A companion to the film by Martin Doblmeier

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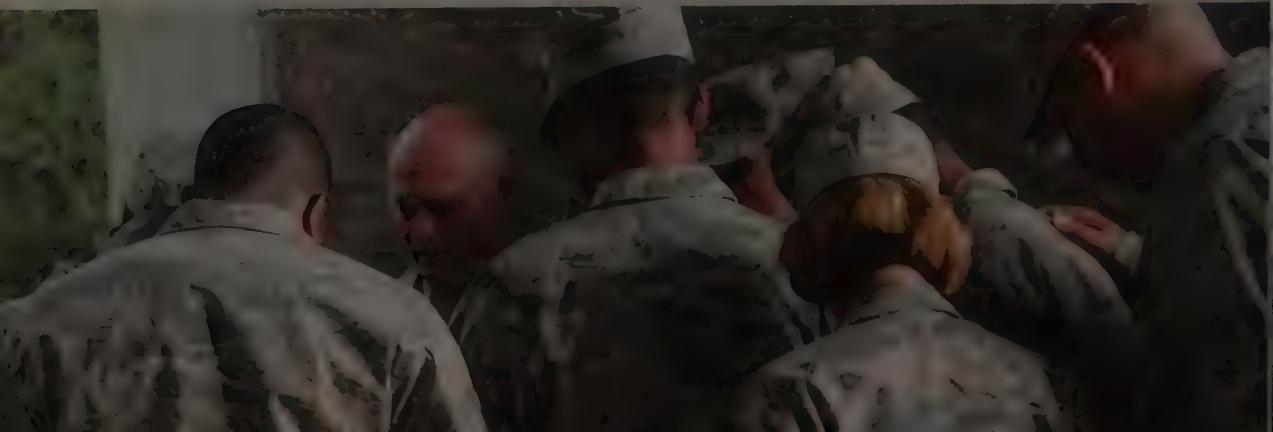


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Clutter counselor

YOU'VE MOVED across the country, and you're a long way from the town you know best. Time flies, and it's been a couple of years since you've been back. But something has come up, and it turns out you're going to spend a day or two there. When you go back, you can't not go and see that one person, the one who knows you so well and loves you despite it all, and from whom you tend to shy away because he's like a refiner's fire that burns away the dross and leaves you with no way to hide the truth. But you've been away a couple of years. You're a lot more worldly-wise now, and you're not going to be seen through as easily as in the old days.

The conversation starts simply. "What've you been up to?" There're lots of things to say to that. Then, "What're you working on?" That one's a bit harder, because you know it doesn't just mean, "What's keeping you busy?" but, "What's the part of you that's being tested, what are you learning, what's not working, and where are you having to grow through your mistakes?" You blunder on, offering up quite a few responses and hoping the number of different activities will prevent the conversation from settling on any single one of them. "That's a lot of things," says your refiner's fire. "Which is the one that really matters?"

Oh dear. You've dug yourself a hole. It's as if you've been buried in sand at the seaside. You can't avoid a question like that. It's too obvious. Your jokey manner and casual charm have failed. You admit that you could have avoided this conversation but that something drew you into it. Part of you wanted this. "Hmm?" says the refiner's fire, pointing out that you haven't answered the question. "Since you put it that way, none of the things I've mentioned is the one that really matters." You lower your eyes and look at the floor, because you feel shame. Shame that your life is so full of padding and that the real quality is buried inside. Shame that this person who knows you so well and understands life so acutely has gotten to the heart of it all in about five minutes. And then, surprising yourself, you say, "The one that really matters is . . ."

And you begin to regain a bit of composure because you've said something good and true. And it turns out, you suddenly realize, that you're actually perceptive and full of self-knowledge and even wisdom. You think maybe the refiner's fire isn't so scary. Maybe we're on a level. But the refiner isn't finished. "So, if that's what really matters, why aren't you filling your whole time with that?" And in an instant you know that any of your answers would be foolish and empty and cowardly and make everything even worse because they'd all illustrate what you

don't want to say, that your life is an elaborate organized conspiracy to avoid the one thing that really matters. The refiner's fire can see that, which may be why you've stayed away, and why you feel so naked and embarrassed yet inspired and repentant now. You've just gotten a glimpse of what it's like to lose the whole world and gain your own soul.

In her novel *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler tells the story of three children who become orphans and of their 19-year-old Uncle Ian. Because he somehow holds himself responsible for their parents' deaths, Ian leaves college and sets aside the plans he had for his life in order to bring up his brother's children. It's not easy, but in losing the world he gains his own soul. When the children leave home, he finds himself overwhelmed by the house's muddle and untidiness. At this moment in walks Rita, a strident, twentysomething, self-styled clutter counselor who throws out 90 percent of the contents of

Maybe it's time to spend our time on the one thing that really matters.

Ian's fridge, along with half the contents of the attic, basement, and almost every other room. With unerring perception, she recognizes the exhaustion of the lingering memories and unmade decisions represented by every item of clutter. To everyone's surprise, Ian falls in love with and marries Rita. Maybe it's because she returns him to the simplicity of the one thing that really matters—the simplicity that led him to do such a radical thing when he was an apparently carefree 19-year-old all those years before.

When God became a human being in Jesus Christ, God hired Rita the clutter counselor and cleared out all that didn't really matter. Jesus spent all his time on the one thing that really mattered: us. Maybe today is the right time to come before the refiner's fire and confront those two exasperating questions, "What's the one thing that really matters?" and "So why aren't you filling your whole time with that?" Maybe now is the time to call for Rita, clear out all that doesn't really matter, and humbly but seriously resolve to spend our time on the one thing that really does matter.

Samuel Wells is the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London.

The robust soul

by Matthew Lynn Riegel

Can faith make one's life better? More vibrant? More robust?" These questions sound like a pitch for yet another warmed-over prosperity gospel. But any suggestion of that school of thought ends as soon as it begins in Ted Peters's book. What follows instead is an unexpected journey into the soul and its maladies, with Peters as an affable and chatty tour guide.

What makes this book unexpected is its departure from the author's well-known forte. Peters, who has taught at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union since 1978, is best known for his work at the nexus of theology and the natural sciences. What he offers in this book is part theological reflection, part manual for the care of souls.

With a nod to various theologies of the soul, Peters avoids protracted arguments about the soul's nature or even existence. Instead, he pursues an understanding of the soul that is more experiential than metaphysical. This emphasis allows him to dive straight into the human condition. He then focuses on the struggles of people with two different and troubling conditions, the "fragile soul" and the "broken soul." As nostrum for these maladies, Peters advances the Lutheran "justification by faith" formula.

The fragile soul and broken soul are conceptually very different from one another. The fragile soul might be described as the human's anxious state before a just and demanding God or moral code. Appealing to Luther's catechetical discussion of idolatry, Peters imagines the fragile soul desperately trying to apply duct tape to the fractured perimeter of its moral world.

Justification by faith is a no-brainer as

remedy for the fragile soul. Peters's greatest insight here is the universal applicability of this remedy. He argues that the condition of the fragile soul does not require a preexistent Judeo-Christian matrix. Fragile souls are fragile souls with or without the glowering God of the Ten Commandments demanding his due.

The broken soul, on the other hand, is beyond moral categories or even traditional notions of atonement. Here Peters engages in a lengthy discussion of moral injury among military veterans. Intriguingly, he identifies military personnel as "invisible scapegoats" and juxtaposes them with the "visible scapegoats" of which Christ is the archetype. Peters resists substitutionary thinking at this point, claiming that any such thought will be nonsensical to someone whose moral world has utterly collapsed. In place of substitution, Peters offers accompaniment, the solidarity of Christ in the moral abyss, as the beginning of healing.

To make this case, however, Peters must disclose what he intends by "justification by faith." He acknowledges the importance of knowledge and assent to theological propositions in the life of faith. A believing faith believes in something, and that something is inextricably connected to knowledge of the object of faith. Even so, Peters engages questions of certainty and doubt, allowing him to move beyond knowledge to trust.

Peters, who is willing to part from historic theological formulas, has little use for forensic justification—the atonement model whereby God declares the sinner as righteous and imputes Christ's righteousness (which is alien to the sinner) to the sinner. Peters argues for justification



Sin Boldly! Justifying Faith for Fragile and Broken Souls

By Ted Peters
Fortress, 480 pp., \$44.00 paperback

by indwelling rather than imputation. This indwelling of Christ in the soul is not merely grace as a substance or a reward dispensed to us in regard for our act of faith. Any faith that holds God as its object is secondary to the faithfulness that Christ shows toward human creatures. Peters seems to relish turning classic models on their head as he claims that Christ has faith in us and it's *this* faith that justifies.

When Peters engages sanctification as a category, he is loath to separate it from justification. He poses the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) as a foil to his understanding of sanctification, arguing against what he considers to be tired categories that obscure the fullness of Luther's notions of indwelling and neighbor love. Peters marshals a wide array of modern writers and holds them in tension with Luther. Unfortunately, he doesn't avail himself of those elements of the scholastic Lutheran tradition that would have helped him to move more nimbly through his argument, such as the distinction between sanctification in the *broad* sense (which includes justification) and sanctification in the *narrow* sense (which excludes justification).

The concluding chapters on faith, justification, sanctification, and justice lay bare the concept of the robust soul, and it

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is the creation of this robust soul that constitutes Peters's therapeutic goal. Here the author is faithful to his core conviction that we cannot create the robust soul. The consequence solely of Jesus' work in us, the robust soul lives a robust life marked by faith and justice as a necessary and spontaneous consequence.

This book is a remarkable attempt to translate theological concepts into a manual for the care of souls. Some readers will readily identify with the fragile soul, and the counsel Peters offers may give relief to such troubled consciences. It seems less likely that someone with a broken soul will pick up this book or persist through to the relevant chapters. Still, pastors may find it helpful in their ministries.

A greater divide in opinion about the book may result from its style. It is conversational, at times confessional, and frequently folksy. The prose often reads like a string of essays that are only loosely connected. There are periodic excursions that could have been handled more tersely without compromising the argument. Readers who seek a tightly focused work in an academic tone will be disappointed. Those who enjoy sitting in the presence of a gentle raconteur who happily meanders through the topic with a breezy stream-of-consciousness manner will find it a pleasant read.

When We Imagine Grace: Black Men and Subject Making

By Simone C. Drake
University of Chicago Press,
248 pp., \$35.00 paperback

Reading is occasionally an illicit experience for me. Intrigued by a title, theme or popular response, I dive into a book. I read and absorb the material, but along the way, an awareness arises: *I am not the intended audience. I am not the one for whom this book was written. Should I even spend my time reading it?*

Simone C. Drake's book had this effect on me. Drake, who teaches African-American and African studies at Ohio State University, desires to "empower black people." I am a white woman. My marriage to a black man and the birth of our biracial sons do not (and will not ever) provide me with an innate understanding of what it means to be a person of color in America today. But these relationships have propelled me toward understanding what it means to grow up with skin different from my own. With discomfort, I've leaned into new view-

Reviewed by Cara Meredith, who is a writer, blogger, and speaker from Seattle, Washington, and cohost of the Shalom Book Club podcast.



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Faith Matters

Carol Zaleski

“I live in what seems to this New York City native to be a sleepy town in western Massachusetts. They tell me it’s a city, but I don’t believe it, for it is peopled by people who know one another. And here in this sleepy town—once home to Jonathan Edwards—I am discovering America. After decades immersed in John Henry Newman, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and the like, my thoughts have turned to William James and his quintessentially American, characteristically unfinished religious project. Life is quiet; with our boys grown, my husband and I have long hours to devote to plotting our next book. As we sit in our garage-turned-library, a pair of mourning doves keeps sentry on the roof, chipmunks dart in and out of the tall grass, and mosquitoes return to remind us that though blessed, we are still in exile from Eden.”

Read Carol’s essays in *Christian Century*

points and sharpened my understanding of my misperceptions. And I've learned that I can no longer deny nor feign ignorance when it comes to issues of race.

In this sense, Drake's book is not illicit. It's crucial for readers of all races. It affirms that everyone must seek to grow in understanding in relation to members of the most marginalized of racial and ethnic groups: black men.

Drake draws many of her early arguments from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Inspired by the character Baby Suggs, Drake encourages her readers to imagine for black men "a liminal space suspended between the realities of their racialized existence and the possibility of something else." This liminal space has parallels in the *already but not yet* of Christian theology, but it's also a claim about how African-American men might be viewed differently in American society.

Another character from *Beloved*, Paul D, is the springboard for Drake's analysis:

Being *willing* to throw off the pretense of invincibility, and making the choice to reject notions that real men are "strong," allow Paul D to imagine a black masculine self that is not bound by societal definitions, a self that is produced by imagining what has not been extended to him by the nation—grace.

The reader begins to imagine grace for Paul D as he strives to push back against popular conceptions of masculinity. By naming the fragmented pieces of belief we've placed upon black men, says Drake, we begin to think differently about assigned gender roles—just as we begin to see vulnerability as empowering, rather than disabling.

Drake roots her arguments in the lives of historical figures as well as fictional characters. Expounding on a forgotten part of history, she portrays the African-American cowboy and Pullman porter Nat Love as "an exemplar of how race, gender, sexuality and class become intricately intertwined within the black interior." Love navigated race in a predominantly white western narrative and created a world in which he could have autonomy and self-actualization. His story tears down stereotypes and boosts racial pride for black individuals.

How does Love's narrative translate to workplaces, neighborhoods, and churches today? It imagines that blackness—or whatever skin color one boasts—is not erased from life's story, but celebrated wholeheartedly. My husband and I celebrate the dual heritages of our sons and work to ensure that people who look like both Mama and Daddy surround our family. We help our young boys find racial pride through characters in books and by interacting with people who look like them at our church. Drake shows how Love did the same, helping black people create "images of themselves and their accomplishments." There is, perhaps, no greater use for imagination.

Drake brings together an unlikely trinity when she pairs orator Marcus Garvey, record producer Berry Gordy, and rapper Jay Z (aka Shawn Carter), all of whom were crucial in creating a "hip-hop genealogy of black entrepreneurship." In a country where the 14th Amendment mingled with Jim Crow laws, African Americans have not been afforded the same opportunities as their white compatriots—and thus have had to build a brand for themselves. This brand building is what Garvey, Gordy, and Jay Z have in common.

Nobody living in the 21st century can deny Jay Z's influence on the music industry and beyond, given the reign he shares with his wife, Beyoncé. His early work capitalized on its portrayals of hustling—that is, a black man from the projects doing whatever he needs to do, legally and illegally, to make it in a white man's world. Hustling, Drake asserts, is a far cry from grace, and she shows how Jay Z moved beyond it both lyrically and economically. Still, "in the context of how Jay Z presents the hustle lyrically, it is bound up in imagining grace." And so, his music—and his business of *self*—becomes a poetic gift, a complex form of art that cries out for justice.

As long as systems of *disgrace* continue to plague black men in America, grace must be imagined. To do so isn't illicit; it's necessary. That is the heart of Drake's argument. What does this mean for readers who aren't black men? We start at the beginning, extending grace as individuals and allies, so racial justice might be communally recognized and ultimately achieved.



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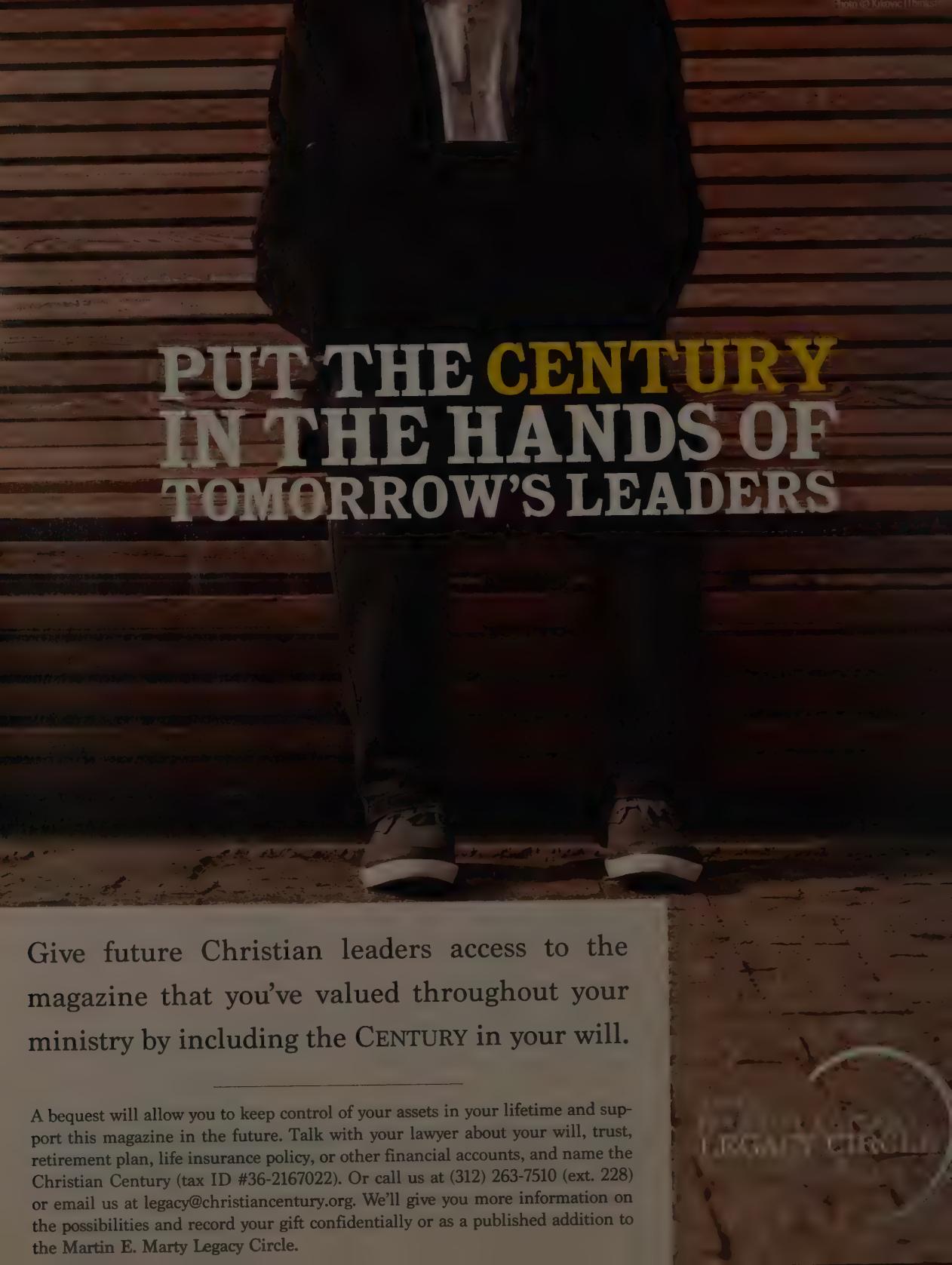


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Pax Romana: War, Peace and Conquest in the Roman World

By Adrian Goldsworthy

Yale University Press, 528 pp., \$32.50

A few years ago, I was visiting Rome for the umpteenth time and marveling at the city's ancient aqueducts, public baths, paved roads, and sewer system. Swept up in the glories of these feats of technology that benefited the whole populace, I wrote a blog post suggesting that maybe, just maybe, empires aren't all bad.

The online response was fast, furious, and vituperative. My friends to my ideological left were horrified that I could consider such a thing, much less make that opinion publicly known.

Adrian Goldsworthy acknowledges the same danger at the outset of his new history of Rome's unparalleled expansion and centuries of relative peace (and dominance). Opening with a moving reflection on his own upbringing in World War II Britain, he then writes, "Even in the modern world peace is a rare and precious thing. If the Romans really did create conditions where most of the provinces lived in peace for long periods, then it is well worth studying this achievement."

The truth is, those of us who are involved in theology and ministry get most of our information about the Roman Empire through the lens of the New Testament writers based in first-century Palestine. That's a bit like learning about the United States by reading the literature of Puerto Rico. As Goldsworthy notes, Judaea wasn't even a true Roman province but an "equestrian province." It didn't even rate a Roman legion, hosting only military units raised from neighboring Samaria and the gentile population.

And that was a problem, because the internal strife in Judaea was among the worst in the empire: Jews hated Samaritans, Samaritans hated Jews, and they both hated gentiles. Constant civil conflict in the territory vexed the governing Romans, including a guy named Pontius Pilate.

Nevertheless, Rome kept the peace

in Palestine as it did across a breathtakingly large empire: through a combination of laissez-faire government and military might. On the one hand, Roman governors were sensitive to local laws and customs. Goldsworthy quotes letters from the Emperor Trajan to his magistrate in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, instructing him to rule in disputes according to Bithynian laws. Similarly, Rome left in place local religion, rulers, and even currency.

On the other hand, if locals got uppity—or worse, revolutionary—Roman force came down like a crushing hammer. The Jews learned this in 6–4 BC, and again in AD 70.

When Augustus, the first emperor, died in AD 14, he thought he had extended the empire as far as it could go. His successors disagreed. While the Italian peninsula remained the center of the empire, Gaul, Germanica, and many territories in the East were annexed. Only North Africa and Britain—both of which were lost several times during the republic and early empire—remained out of Rome's command and control.

Any popular history of Rome these days stands in the shade of Mary Beard's exciting and eminently readable *SPQR*, and *Pax Romana* is no exception. Goldsworthy is a fine writer, and he avoids getting bogged down in tedious details, but this book would be a challenge for someone not already knowledgeable about Roman history. The book's outline is roughly historical, but Goldsworthy is more interested in themes than in chronology. This keeps the book from becoming pedantic.

Among these themes is warfare, something at which the Romans excelled. Goldsworthy also deftly handles issues like banditry, travel, and governance. Curiously, he pays almost no attention to the religious life of Rome and the provinces. This is unfortunate because allowing native religion to flourish was key to the success of the Pax Romana. The Romans were deeply religious—far more than the Greeks, for example—but they did not impose their religion on conquered lands.

What they did impose was the rule of law, and they did so by force. Goldsworthy notes that social and economic

troubles in the Judaean countryside created "a desperate rural population willing to risk rebellion whenever strong leaders emerged." But after a couple of unsuccessful uprisings, they learned their lesson. "Ultimately, the Jewish subjects of the Roman Empire accepted imperial rule and ceased to rebel." Further, Goldsworthy notes, "even during the revolts, it does appear that as much or more of their hostility focused on non-Jewish neighbors rather than on the empire."

By the middle of the first century, Paul's letters were traveling along Roman roads. So was Paul himself. The religion he preached caught on particularly among Roman soldiers, who were professional, well-paid, well-traveled, and probably numbered 250,000 by that time. The same legionaries who kept the Roman peace also spread the Christian faith.

As we know from Paul's own testimony, his status as a Roman citizen not only prolonged his life and helped him avoid various tortures but meant he could continue to preach and write while under house arrest by Marcus Antonius Felix, the governor of Judaea (see Acts 24). For Paul at least, it was good to be a Roman.

In the end, for all our ambivalence about the Roman Empire, it's hard to imagine Christianity spreading as it did without the Pax Romana.

Reviewed by Tony Jones, who is the author of *Did God Kill Jesus? He teaches theology at Fuller Theological Seminary and United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, and he edits the Theology for the People books at Fortress Press.*

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The Beautiful Possible: A Novel

By Amy Gottlieb

Harper, 336 pp., \$15.99 paperback

This is a novel about faith and proximity. How far or how close do we stand to the religious traditions that shape us? Rosalie, a new rabbi's wife, decides early in the novel that she will never attend another Kol Nidre service. Instead she will greet the New Year from the porch of her house, "close enough to hear the words, yet distant enough to let the prayer resonate in her bones. If every Jew is standing to face a Torah scroll on the first hour of the Yom Kippur fast, Rosalie will face a yard, a tree, a night sky."

Rosalie's orientation to faith, marriage, and synagogue is at the center of this rare thing: a fundamentally theological novel. Even more rare is a theological novel with a female protagonist.

The novel begins in the late 1940s, before Rosalie's marriage to a young rabbinic student, Sol. In seminary Sol is assigned as a *chavrusa* (study partner) to a German-Jewish refugee named Walter. Walter had fled to India after his family was killed during Kristallnacht. He'd spent several years in the ashram of Tagore, the Indian poet, philosopher, and spiritual leader, before arriving at the seminary to study Hebrew. Both Rosalie and Sol fall in love with him, but only Rosalie becomes his lover. Caught between the skeptical Walter and the rule-following Sol, Rosalie ultimately chooses Sol's version of faith and settles down. But Walter remains a potent enigma for both of them.

Rosalie realizes immediately that she has chosen, perhaps wrongly, a life with many parameters. In post-World War II America, everyone is building new structures. Rosalie and Sol build a synagogue, and the community around them builds homes, businesses, and schools. But in Rosalie's interior life, she challenges these limits. She wrestles with her desires to live beyond them, wondering where sources of renewal are available when everything is so bounded. Her choice to stand outside of the Kol Nidre service represents her marginal position vis-à-vis all of the vows she has made. Her opportunities to annul



and recommit to her vows mean that she constantly reevaluates how she stands in relation to her Jewish faith.

One answer to her interior dilemma comes at midlife in the rediscovery of Walter during a trip to Israel with Sol. Walter and Rosalie reconnect and begin an affair that lasts for many years. Their dialogue concerns what of God or meaning can be expressed in words. Quoting Tagore, scripture, and theologian Abraham Heschel, Walter and Rosalie play a game of question and answer that always leads to more questions. Rosalie ponders her relationships with Walter and Sol in midlife in this way:

She'elah: In the world of men and women, which is stronger: Love or Torah?

Tesouyah: As it is written, *many waters cannot extinguish love.* Human love is bounded by choice; Torah is unbounded by interpretation. Love can birth generations, while Torah breeds infinite words that contradict each other for generations.

No simplistic rejection of Torah or embrace of love can satisfy Rosalie's restless questioning. She cannot discard her faith or her marriage, but she also cannot live only within their bounds. "I feel like I've been dropped inside a riddle that's impossible to solve," she tells Walter.

The novel is framed by the reflections of Rosalie's daughter Maya, who grew up watching her mother carefully without understanding her. "Our house was a palace of stories," Maya says. "The ancient ones in books, the love stories in the songs, the secrets my mother whispered into the phone late at night. At times, I would drift off to sleep and imagine how all the stories were part of one great book that hummed with sadness and longing." Honest wrestling, it seems, is itself unbounded even by time. It passes down, like Torah, through generations.

We have too few novels that unabashedly interrogate history and society through the lens of theological wrangling. At once sensual and philosophical, this is a brave and unusual work of fiction.

Reviewed by Amy Erykholm.

BookMarks

**Pontius Pilate:
Deciphering a Memory**
By Aldo Schiavone
Translated by Jeremy Carden. Liveright, 240
pp., \$24.95

This masterful biography presents a plausible account of Pontius Pilate's character, motivations, and emotions during the hours between Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. Aldo Schiavone, a scholar of Roman law, relies mostly on John's narrative with support from the synoptic accounts and those of Philo, Josephus, and later writers. He's not shy about naming contradictions in the various accounts of Pilate, and he identifies in Matthew's Gospel "the zero point in the genealogy of Christian anti-Semitism." For Schiavone, Jesus and Pilate embody the perpetual existential clash in which "each of us is always suspended" between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar.

**Who Counts? 100 Sheep,
10 Coins, and 2 Sons**
By Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg
Sasso, illustrated by Margaux Meganck
Westminster John Knox, 40 pp., \$16.00

There are many children's books based on Luke's account of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. This may be the first one to include a note to parents warning against the subtle anti-Jewish messages that often attend allegorical readings of these parables. Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso's simple prose and Margaux Meganck's culturally sensitive illustrations create an expansive vision in which everybody counts. When the prodigal son's father realizes that he has "discounted" his older son, he says "I love you" and asks him to join the party. "Without you," he admits, "something is missing. With you, our family is complete." Adult readers may wonder how history would be different if Christians consistently said those same words to their siblings of every faith.

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ON Media

Total (and equal) depravity

Every spring I reread the works of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. As the sun starts breaking through the interminable gray northeasterly skies, my mind turns to gimblets and the bleakness of human nature.

Masters of early detective noir, Chandler and Hammett knew that the only real mystery was the inscrutable human will. Murder, embezzlement, pornography rings, and adultery lead us into the much wilder terrain of human intention.

Noir has always appealed to me because it is so unsentimental about human nature. Both writers suggest that even the most respectable societies are built on a substratum of corruption. In their fiction, this is personified by mob families, gin runners, corrupt police, and sex rackets. Nothing and no one is immune to the corrupting influences of money and power, and nearly everyone succumbs.

This fascination is why, perhaps, I have become so enamored of two recent pop culture juggernauts, *S-Town*, a podcast from the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*, and HBO's limited-run drama *Big Little Lies*, both of which use murder to develop rich explorations of human characters. They borrow the unsentimentality of noir but offer something more hopeful than total despair.

John B. McLemore, the central character of *S-Town*, could give any noir detective a run for his money. He sees greed, dishonesty, jealousy, and violence in almost every person and institution of his hometown, Woodstock, Alabama. Convinced that a murder is being covered up by the sheriff's office in his rural county, McLemore contacts *This American Life* reporter Brian Reed and asks him to investigate.

The story that McLemore tells about his hometown, and that Reed tries to corroborate, is fringed by salacious possibilities: buried treasure, conniving relatives, medieval alchemy, sadomasochist rituals, white supremacist violence, unsolvable mazes, and family history that resurges with tragic fatality. It's noir meets Faulkner meets Internet conspiracy theory.

The intricate hooks and leads that *S-Town* traces are a bit hard to follow. But it soon becomes apparent that the details don't really matter. The plots of noir novels rarely add up anyway. The point is to follow the guide. And our guide—and the mystery at the heart of the podcast—is McLemore himself.

McLemore's conflicted feelings about his hometown give the listener the first puzzle. In his ambivalence—if not outright scorn—toward Woodstock, we are given permission to recoil. But in his unwillingness to leave the town, and his abundantly displayed commitment to the very people and places he despises, we can't help seeing the town and its inhabitants as lovable because loved. This tension is something like the hedge maze McLemore has built on his 126-acre family property: if set just so, it is unsolvable; it becomes a trap, not a puzzle.

Despite his mazes, what McLemore seems to want most of all is to be understood. Reed eventually espouses this as the ethic of the show: truly trying to understand another person is worth doing in and of itself.

Set in glistening blue Monterey, California, *Big Little Lies* seems as far politically and geographically as possible from the deep red of rural Alabama. But like *S-Town*, it opens on a murder scene.



VIOLENCE ON MAIN STREET: Madeline (Reese Witherspoon, left), Jane (Shailene Woodley, center), and Celeste (Nicole Kidman) and their children outside the elementary school that is at the center of *Big Little Lies*.

The setup is pure noir: nothing screams “all is not well in paradise” like murder at an upscale elementary school fundraiser. And as in many noir novels, the murder itself recedes in order to explore the characters involved.

The story settles on a small group of dysfunctional women: Madeline MacKenzie (Reese Witherspoon), a helicopter parent who hovers fiercely over the school pickup line; Celeste Wright (Nicole Kidman), former power attorney turned stay-at-home mom; Jane Chapman (Shailene Woodley), a young single mom who is punching above her class category; Renata Klein (Laura Dern), the only full-time working mom in the group; and Bonnie Carlson (Zoë Kravitz), a yoga teacher and the new wife of Madeline’s first husband.

Watching the suffocating politics of wealthy people policing each other through parenting is not my idea of a good way to spend seven hours. But the care and generosity shown to the characters, and the skilled acting that ren-

ders them in full flesh, pulled me in. All the big lies about rape, murder, adultery, domestic violence—and the little ones about jealousy, gossip, narcissism—draw the viewer to see the real humans struggling to know themselves and each other.

At a turning point, Renata and Jane face off over accusations of bullying between their children. Almost imperceptibly, Jane lets down her guard, and instead of attacking, as is Renata’s habit when she senses weakness, Renata leans forward, and they both seem to see each other for the first time. Everything that follows—in intimate lives and dramatic crescendos—blooms from that tiny moment of empathy. It suggests that this show shares with *S-Town* an ethic of human understanding.

We hear a lot these days about the difficulty of getting outside the bubbles of our own class, race, or geographic location. Red states and blue states can seem as far apart as different planets.

In a way, early noir helped invent this

very juxtaposition. It is not an accident that all Chandler and Hammett stories take place in Los Angeles and New York City, and often feature innocent mid-western victims lured to their moral, if not physical, demise in the corrupt hotbeds of coastal cities. Maybe it is a sign of progress that *S-Town* and *Big Little Lies* suggest that things are just as screwed up in Alabama as in Monterey. We might call it the Calvinist principle: true equality in total depravity. Instead of noting the nobility and worth of all, I recognize that I am just as screwed up as everyone else.

But even though both series play with noir conventions, neither accepts depravity as a given. Where Chandler and Hammett were content to pull back the curtain on corruption, *S-Town* and *Big Little Lies* invite us to walk inside, make ourselves a gimlet, find the nearest character, and start a conversation.

The author is Kathryn Reklis, who teaches theology at Fordham University.

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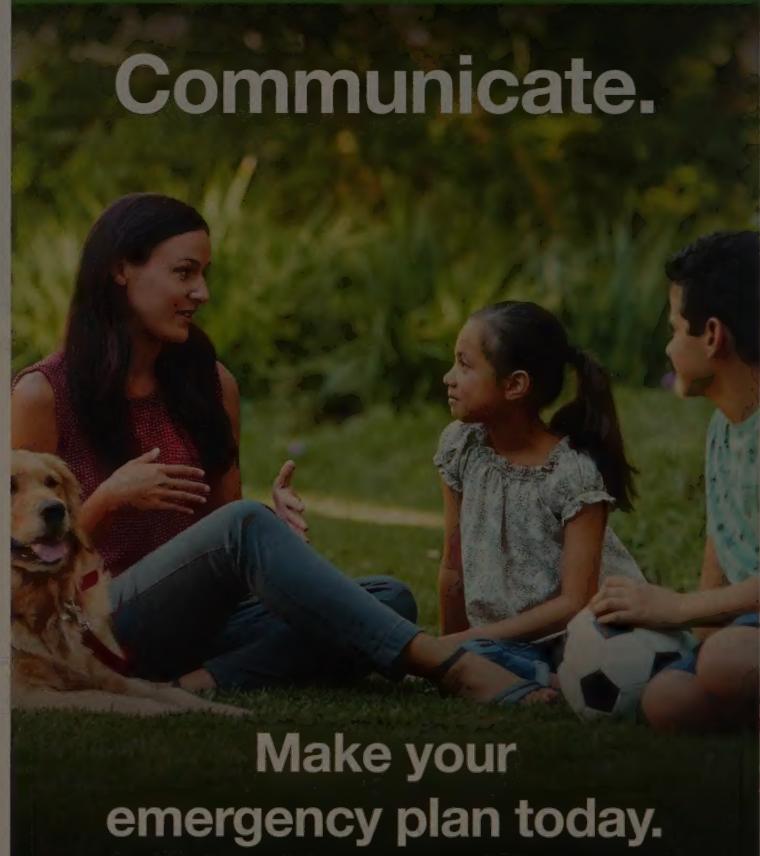
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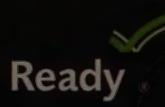




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Trinity with Saint Jerome, by Andrea del Castagno (1410–1457)

In Renaissance painting, Jerome is usually shown in his study translating the Bible into Latin. Here Andrea del Castagno depicts Jerome's vision of the Trinity, a much rarer subject. Jerome is flanked by Eustochium and her mother, Paula, Jerome's beloved disciple and associate. Jerome is depicted as a penitent based on the most quoted paragraph of his famous *Epistle 22* to Eustochium, which describes his years in the Syrian desert: "Whenever I found a deep valley or rough mountainside or rocky precipice, I made it my place of prayer and of torture for my unhappy flesh." In a later collection of letters and writings attributed to Jerome, the author writes, "I have seen with the sight of divine vision. . . . My witness is the Trinity itself, which I saw, I know not with what kind of sight." Castagno represents the Trinity as a Throne of Grace (Heb. 4:16), drastically foreshortened—for which he was criticized by the clergy. Jerome's red cardinal's hat is seen at his feet and his animal symbol, the lion, is visible behind him.

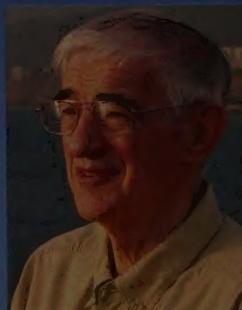
Art selection and commentary by Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the art department at Baylor University, and Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in the school's religion department.

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John Dominic Crossan is generally regarded as the leading historical Jesus scholar in the world. Educated in Ireland and the United States, he taught at DePaul University in Chicago from 1969 to 1995 and is now professor emeritus in the religious studies department. His best-selling books include *The Historical Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, *The Birth of Christianity*, and *Who Killed Jesus?*

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